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ÉMILE ZOLA

LA CURÉE

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LA CURÉE

Translated from the French
BY
ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

With an Essay by
HENRY JAMES

PUBLISHED IN NEW YORK BY
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LA CURÉE

NOTE

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THE PUBLISHERS.

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ÉMILE ZOLA[1]

By Henry James

If it be true that the critical spirit to-day, in presence of the rising tide of prose fiction, a watery waste out of which old standards and landmarks are seen barely to emerge, like chimneys and tops of trees in a country under flood —if it be true that the anxious observer, with the water up to his chin, finds himself asking for the *reason* of the strange phenomenon, for its warrant and title, so we likewise make out that these credentials rather fail to float on the surface. We live in a world of wanton and importunate fable, we breathe its air and consume its fruits; yet who shall say that we are able, when invited, to account for our preferring it so largely to the world of fact? To do so would be to make some adequate statement of the good the product in question does us. What does it do for our life, our mind, our manners, our morals—what does it do that history, poetry, philosophy may not do, as well or better, to warn, to comfort and command the countless thousands for whom and by whom it comes into being? We seem too often left with our riddle on our hands. The lame conclusion on which we retreat is that "stories" are multiplied, circulated, paid for, on the scale of the present hour, simply because people "like" them. As to why people *should* like anything so loose and mean as the preponderant mass of the "output," so little indebted for the magic of its action to any mystery

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in the making, is more than the actual state of our perceptions enables us to say.

This bewilderment might be our last word if it were not for the occasional occurrence of accidents especially appointed to straighten out a little our tangle. We are reminded that if the unnatural prosperity of the wanton fable cannot be adequately explained, it can at least be illustrated with a sharpness that is practically an argument. An abstract solution failing we encounter it in the concrete. We catch in short a new impression or, to speak more truly, recover an old one. It was always there to be had, but we ourselves throw off an oblivion, an indifference for which there are plenty of excuses. We become conscious, for our profit, of a *case*, and we see that our mystification came from the way cases had appeared for so long to fail us. None of the shapeless forms about us for the time had attained to the dignity of one. The one I am now conceiving as suddenly effective—for which I fear I must have been regarding it as somewhat in eclipse—is that of Emile Zola, whom, as a manifestation of the sort we are considering, three or four striking facts have lately combined to render more objective and, so to speak, more massive. His close connection with the most resounding of recent public quarrels; his premature and disastrous death; above all, at the moment I write, the appearance of his last-finished novel, bequeathed to his huge public from beyond the grave—these rapid events have thrust him forward and made him loom abruptly larger; much as if our pedestrian critic, treading the dusty highway, had turned a sharp corner.

It is not assuredly that Zola has ever been veiled or unapparent; he had, on the contrary, been digging his field these thirty years, and for all passers to see, with an in-

dustry that kept him, after the fashion of one of the grand grim sowers or reapers of his brother of the brush, or at least of the canvas, Jean-François Millet, duskily outlined against the sky. He was there in the landscape of labour—he had always been; but he was there as a big natural or pictorial feature, a spreading tree, a battered tower, a lumpish round-shouldered useful hayrick, confounded with the air and the weather, the rain and the shine, the day and the dusk, merged more or less, as it were, in the play of the elements themselves. We had got used to him, and, thanks in a measure just to this stoutness of his presence, to the long regularity of his performance, had come to notice him hardly more than the dwellers in the marketplace notice the quarters struck by the town-clock. On top of all accordingly, for our skeptical mood, the sense of his work—a sense determined afresh by the strange climax of his personal history—rings out almost with violence as a reply to our wonder. It is as if an earthquake or some other rude interference had shaken from the town-clock a note of such unusual depth as to compel attention. We therefore once more give heed, and the result of this is that we feel ourselves after a little probably as much enlightened as we can hope ever to be. We have worked round to the so marked and impressive anomaly of the adoption of the futile art by one of the stoutest minds and stoutest characters of our time. This extraordinarily robust worker has found it good enough for him, and if the fact is, as I say, anomalous, we are doubtless helped to conclude that by its anomalies, in future, the bankrupt business, as we are so often moved to pronounce it, will most recover credit.

What is at all events striking for us, critically speaking, is that, in the midst of the dishonour it has gradually

harvested by triumphant vulgarity of practice, its pliancy and applicability can still plead for themselves. The curious contradiction stands forth for our relief—the circumstance that thirty years ago a young man of extraordinary brain and indomitable purpose, wishing to give the measure of these endowments in a piece of work supremely solid, conceived and sat down to Les Rougon-Macquart rather than to an equal task in physics, mathematics, politics or economics. He saw his undertaking, thanks to his patience and courage, practically to a close; so that it is exactly neither of the so-called constructive sciences that happens to have had the benefit, intellectually speaking, of one of the few most constructive achievements of our time. There then, provisionally at least, we touch bottom; we get a glimpse of the pliancy and variety, the ideal of vividness, on behalf of which our equivocal form may appeal to a strong head. In the name of what ideal on its own side, however, does the strong head yield to the appeal? What is the logic of its so deeply committing itself? Zola's case seems to tell us, as it tells us other things. The logic is in its huge freedom of adjustment to the temperament of the worker, which it carries, so to say, as no other vehicle can do. It expresses fully and directly the whole man, and big as he may be it can still be big enough for him without becoming false to its type. We see this truth made strong, from beginning to end, in Zola's work; we see the temperament, we see the whole man, with his size and all his marks, stored and packed away in the huge hold of Les Rougon-Macquart as a cargo is packed away on a ship. His personality is the thing that finally pervades and prevails, just as so often on a vessel the presence of the cargo makes itself felt for the assaulted senses. What has most come home to me in

reading him over is that a scheme of fiction so conducted is in fact a capacious vessel. It can carry anything—with art and force in the stowage; nothing in this case will sink it. And it is the only form for which such a claim can be made. All others have to confess to a smaller scope—to selection, to exclusion, to the danger of distortion, explosion, combustion. The novel has nothing to fear but sailing too light. It will take aboard all we bring in good faith to the dock.

An intense vision of this truth must have been Zola's comfort from the earliest time—the years, immediately following the crash of the Empire, during which he settled himself to the tremendous task he had mapped out. No finer act of courage and confidence, I think, is recorded in the history of letters. The critic in sympathy with him returns again and again to the great wonder of it, in which something so strange is mixed with something so august. Entertained and carried out almost from the threshold of manhood, the high project, the work of a life-time, announces beforehand its inevitable weakness and yet speaks in the same voice for its admirable, its almost unimaginable strength. The strength was in the young man's very person—in his character, his will, his passion, his fighting temper, his aggressive lips, his squared shoulders (when he "sat up") and overweening confidence; his weakness was in that inexperience of life from which he proposed not to suffer, from which he in fact suffered on the surface remarkably little, and from which he was never to suspect, I judge, that he had suffered at all. I may mention for the interest of it that, meeting him during his first short visit to London—made several years before his stay in England during the Dreyfus trial—I received a direct impression of him that was more

informing than any previous study. I had seen him a little, in Paris, years before that, when this impression was a perceptible promise, and I was now to perceive how time had made it good. It consisted, simply stated, in his fairly bristling with the betrayal that nothing whatever had happened to him in life but to write Les Rougon-Macquart. It was even for that matter almost more as if Les Rougon-Macquart had written *him*, written him as he stood and sat, as he looked and spoke, as the long, concentrated, merciless effort had made and stamped and left him. Something very fundamental was to happen to him in due course, it is true, shaking him to his base; fate was not wholly to cheat him of an independent evolution. Recalling him from this London hour one strongly felt during the famous "Affair" that his outbreak in connection with it was the act of a man with arrears of personal history to make up, the act of a spirit for which life, or for which at any rate freedom, had been too much postponed, treating itself at last to a luxury of experience.

I welcomed the general impression at all events—I intimately entertained it; it represented so many things, it suggested, just as it was, such a lesson. You could neither have everything nor be everything—you had to choose; you could not at once sit firm at your job and wander through space inviting initiations. The author of Les Rougon-Macquart had had all those, certainly, that this wonderful company could bring him; but I can scarce express how it was implied in him that his time had been fruitfully passed with *them* alone. His artistic evolution struck one thus as, in spite of its magnitude, singularly simple, and evidence of the simplicity seems further offered by his last production, of which we have just come into possession. "Vérité" truly does give the

measure, makes the author's high maturity join hands with his youth, marks the rigid straightness of his course from point to point. He had seen his horizon and his fixed goal from the first, and no cross-scent, no new distance, no blue gap in the hills to right or to left ever tempted him to stray. "Vérité," of which I shall have more to say, is in fact, as a moral finality and the crown of an edifice, one of the strangest possible performances. Machine-minted and made good by an immense expertness, it yet makes us ask how, for disinterested observation and perception, the writer had used so much time and so much acquisition, and how he can all along have handled so much material without some larger subjective consequence. We really rub our eyes in other words to see so great an intellectual adventure as Les Rougon-Macquart come to its end in deep desert sand. Difficult truly to read, because showing him at last almost completely a prey to the danger that had for a long time more and more dogged his steps, the danger of the mechanical all confident and triumphant, the book is nevertheless full of interest for a reader desirous to penetrate. It speaks with more distinctness of the author's temperament, tone and manner than if, like several of his volumes, it achieved or enjoyed a successful life of its own. Its heavy completeness, with all this, as of some prodigiously neat, strong and complicated scaffolding constructed by a firm of builders for the erection of a house whose foundations refuse to bear it and that is unable therefore to rise—its very betrayal of a method and a habit more than adequate, on past occasions, to similar ends, carries us back to the original rare exhibition, the grand assurance and grand patience with which the system was launched.

If it topples over, the system, by its own weight in these

last applications of it, that only makes the history of its prolonged success the more curious and, speaking for myself, the spectacle of its origin more attaching. Readers of my generation will remember well the publication of "La Conquête de Plassans" and the portent, indefinable but irresistible, after perusal of the volume, conveyed in the general rubric under which it was a first instalment, Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire. It squared itself there at its ease, the announcement, from the first, and we were to learn promptly enough what a fund of life it masked. It was like the mouth of a cave with a signboard hung above, or better still perhaps like the big booth at a fair with the name of the show across the flapping canvas. One strange animal after another stepped forth into the light, each in its way a monster bristling and spotted, each a curiosity of that "natural history" in the name of which we were addressed, though it was doubtless not till the issue of "L'Assommoir" that the true type of the monstrous seemed to be reached. The enterprise, for those who had attention, was even at a distance impressive, and the nearer the critic gets to it retrospectively the more so it becomes. The pyramid had been planned and the site staked out, but the young builder stood there, in his sturdy strength, with no equipment save his two hands and, as we may say, his wheelbarrow and his trowel. His pile of material—of stone, brick and rubble or whatever—was of the smallest, but this he apparently felt as the least of his difficulties. Poor, uninstructed, unacquainted, unintroduced, he set up his subject wholly from the outside, proposing to himself wonderfully to get into it, into its depths, as he went.

If we imagine him asking himself what he knew of the

"social" life of the second Empire to start with, we imagine him also answering in all honesty: "I have my eyes and my ears—I have all my senses: I have what I've seen and heard, what I've smelled and tasted and touched. And then I've my curiosity and my pertinacity; I've libraries, books, newspapers, witnesses, the material, from step to step, of an *enquête*. And then I've my genius—that is, my imagination, my passion, my sensibility to life. Lastly I've my method, and that will be half the battle. Best of all perhaps even, I've plentiful lack of doubt." Of the absence in him of a doubt, indeed of his inability, once his direction taken, to entertain so much as the shadow of one, "Vérité" is a positive monument—which again represents in this way the unity of his tone and the meeting of his extremes. If we remember that his design was nothing if not architectural, that a "majestic whole," a great balanced façade, with all its orders and parts, that a singleness of mass and a unity of effect, in fine, were before him from the first, his notion of picking up his bricks as he proceeded becomes, in operation, heroic. It is not in the least as a record of failure for him that I note this particular fact of the growth of the long series as on the whole the liveliest interest it has to offer. "I don't know my subject, but I must live into it; I don't know life, but I must learn it as I work"—that attitude and programme represent, to my sense, a drama more intense on the worker's own part than any of the dramas he was to invent and put before us.

It was the fortune, it was in a manner the doom, of Les Rougon-Macquart to deal with things almost always in gregarious form, to be a picture of *numbers*, of classes, crowds, confusions, movements, industries—and this for a reason of which it will be interesting to attempt some

account. The individual life is, if not wholly absent, reflected in coarse and common, in generalised terms; whereby we arrive precisely at the oddity just named, the circumstance that, looking out somewhere, and often woefully athirst, for the taste of fineness, we find it not in the fruits of our author's fancy, but in a different matter altogether. We get it in the very history of his effort, the image itself of his lifelong process, comparatively so personal, so spiritual even, and, through all its patience and pain, of a quality so much more distinguished than the qualities he succeeds in attributing to his figures even when he most aims at distinction. There can be no question in these narrow limits of my taking the successive volumes one by one—all the more that our sense of the exhibition is as little as possible an impression of parts and books, of particular "plots" and persons. It produces the effect of a mass of imagery in which shades are sacrificed, the effect of character and passion in the lump or by the ton. The fullest, the most characteristic episodes affect us like a sounding chorus or procession, as with a hubbub of voices and a multitudinous tread of feet. The setter of the mass into motion, he himself, in the crowd, figures best, with whatever queer idiosyncrasies, excrescences and gaps, a being of a substance akin to our own. Taking him as we must, I repeat, for quite heroic, the interest of detail in him is the interest of his struggle at every point with his problem.

The sense for crowds and processions, for the gross and the general, was largely the *result* of this predicament, of the disproportion between his scheme and his material —though it was certainly also in part an effect of his particular turn of mind. What the reader easily discerns in him is the sturdy resolution with which breadth and

nergy supply the place of penetration. He rests to his utmost on his documents, devours and assimilates them, makes them yield him extraordinary appearances of life; but in his way he too improvises in the grand manner, the manner of Walter Scott and of Dumas the elder. We feel that he *has* to improvise for his moral and social world, the world as to which vision and opportunity must come, if they are to come at all, unhurried and unhustled —must take their own time, helped undoubtedly more or less by blue-books, reports and interviews, by inquiries "on the spot," but never wholly replaced by such substitutes without a general disfigurement. Vision and opportunity reside in a personal sense and a personal history, and no short cut to them in the interest of plausible fiction has ever been discovered. The short cut, it is not too much to say, was with Zola the subject of constant ingenious experiment, and it is largely to this source, I surmise, that we owe the celebrated element of his grossness. He was *obliged* to be gross, on his system, or neglect to his cost an invaluable aid to representation, as well as one that apparently struck him as lying close at hand; and I cannot withhold my frank admiration from the courage and consistency with which he faced his need.

His general subject in the last analysis was the nature of man; in dealing with which he took up, obviously, the harp of most numerous strings. His business was to make these strings sound true, and there were none that he did not, so far as his general economy permitted, persistently try. What happened then was that many—say about half, and these, as I have noted, the most silvered, the most golden—refused to give out their music. They would only sound false, since (as with all his earnestness he must have felt) he could command them, through want

of skill, of practice, of ear, to none of the right harmony. What therefore was more natural than that, still splendidly bent on producing his illusion, he should throw himself on the strings he might thump with effect, and should work them, as our phrase is, for all they were worth? The nature of man, he had plentiful warrant for holding, is an extraordinary mixture, but the great thing was to represent a sufficient part of it to show that it was solidly, palpably, commonly the nature. With this preoccupation he doubtless fell into extravagance—there was clearly so much to lead him on. The coarser side of his subject, based on the community of all the instincts, was for instance the more practicable side, a sphere the vision of which required but the general human, scarcely more than the plain physical, initiation, and dispensed thereby conveniently enough with special introductions or revelations. A free entry into this sphere was undoubtedly compatible with a youthful career as hampered right and left even as Zola's own.

He was in prompt possession thus of the range of sympathy that he *could* cultivate, though it must be added that the complete exercise of that sympathy might have encountered an obstacle that would somewhat undermine his advantage. Our friend might have found himself able, in other words, to pay to the instinctive, as I have called it, only such tribute as protesting taste (his own dose of it) permitted. Yet there it was again that fortune and his temperament served him. Taste as he knew it, taste as his own constitution supplied it, proved to have nothing to say to the matter. His own dose of the precious elixir had no perceptible regulating power. Paradoxical as the remark may sound, this accident was positively to operate as one of his greatest felicities. There

re parts of his work, those dealing with romantic or poetic elements, in which the inactivity of the principle in question is sufficiently hurtful; but it surely should not be described as hurtful to such pictures as "Le Ventre de Paris," as "L'Assommoir," as "Germinal." The conception on which each of these productions rests is that of a world with which taste has nothing to do, and though the act of representation may be justly held, as an artistic act, to involve its presence, the discrimination would probably have been in fact, given the particular illusion sought, more detrimental than the deficiency. There was a great outcry, as we all remember, over the rank materialism of "L'Assommoir," but who cannot see to-day how much a milder infusion of it would have told against the close embrace of the subject aimed at? "L'Assommoir" is the nature of man—but not his finer, nobler, cleaner or more cultivated nature; it is the image of his free instincts, the better and the worse, the better struggling as they can, gasping for light and air, the worse making themselves at home in darkness, ignorance and poverty. The whole handling makes for emphasis and scale, and it is not to be measured how, as a picture of conditions, the thing would have suffered from timidity. The qualification of the painter was precisely his stoutness of stomach, and we scarce exceed in saying that to have taken in and given out again less of the infected air would, with such a resource, have meant the waste of a faculty.

I may add in this connection moreover that refinement of intention did on occasion and after a fashion of its own unmistakably preside at these experiments; making the remark in order to have done once for all with a feature of Zola's literary physiognomy that appears to have attached the gaze of many persons to the exclusion of

every other. There are judges in these matters so perversely preoccupied that for them to see anywhere the "improper" is for them straightway to cease to see anything else. The said improper, looming supremely large and casting all the varieties of the proper quite into the shade, suffers thus in their consciousness a much greater extension than it ever claimed, and this consciousness becomes, for the edification of many and the information of a few, a colossal reflector and record of it. Much may be said, in relation to some of the possibilities of the nature of man, of the nature in especial of the "people," on the defect of our author's sense of proportion. But the sense of proportion of many of those he has scandalised would take us further yet. I recall at all events as relevant—for it comes under a very attaching general head—two occasions of long ago, two Sunday afternoons in Paris, on which I found the question of intention very curiously lighted. Several men of letters of a group in which almost every member either had arrived at renown or was well on his way to it, were assembled under the roof of the most distinguished of their number, where they exchanged free confidences on current work, on plans and ambitions, in a manner full of interest for one never previously privileged to see artistic conviction, artistic passion (at least on the literary ground) so systematic and so articulate. "Well, I on my side," I remember Zola's saying, "am engaged on a book, a study of the *mœurs* of the people, for which I am making a collection of all the 'bad words,' the *gros mots*, of the language, those with which the vocabulary of the people, those with which their familiar talk, bristles." I was struck with the tone in which he made the announcement—without bravado and without apology, as an interesting idea that

had come to him and that he was working, really to arrive at character and particular truth, with all his conscience; just as I was struck with the unqualified interest that his plan excited. It was *on* a plan that he was working—formidably, almost grimly, as his fatigued face showed; and the whole consideration of this interesting element partook of the general seriousness.

But there comes back to me also as a companion-piece to this another day, after some interval, on which the interest was excited by the fact that the work for love of which the brave license had been taken was actually under the ban of the daily newspaper that had engaged to "serialise" it. Publication had definitively ceased. The thing had run a part of its course, but it had outrun the courage of editors and the curiosity of subscribers—that stout curiosity to which it had evidently in such good faith been addressed. The chorus of contempt for the ways of such people, their pusillanimity, their superficiality, vulgarity, intellectual platitude, was the striking note on this occasion; for the journal impugned had declined to proceed and the serial, broken off, been obliged, if I am not mistaken, to seek the hospitality of other columns, secured indeed with no great difficulty. The composition so qualified for future fame was none other, as I was later to learn, than "L'Assommoir"; and my reminiscence has perhaps no greater point than in connecting itself with a matter always dear to the critical spirit, especially when the latter has not too completely elbowed out the romantic—the matter of the "origins," the early consciousness, early steps, early tribulations, early obscurity, as so often happens, of productions finally crowned by time.

Their greatness is for the most part a thing that has originally begun so small; and this impression is par-

ticularly strong when we have been in any degree present, so to speak, at the birth. The course of the matter is apt to tend preponderantly in that case to enrich our stores of irony. In the eventual conquest of consideration by an abused book we recognise, in other terms, a drama of romantic interest, a drama often with large comic no less than with fine pathetic interweavings. It may of course be said in this particular connection that "L'Assommoir" had not been one of the literary things that creep humbly into the world. Its "success" may be cited as almost insolently prompt, and the fact remains true if the idea of success be restricted, after the inveterate fashion, to the idea of circulation. What remains truer still, however, is that for the critical spirit circulation mostly matters not the least little bit, and it is of the success with which the history of Gervaise and Coupeau nestles in *that* capacious bosom, even as the just man sleeps in Abraham's, that I here speak. But it is a point I may better refer to a moment hence.

Though a summary study of Zola need not too anxiously concern itself with book after book—always with a partial exception from this remark for "L'Assommoir"—groups and varieties none the less exist in the huge series, aids to discrimination without which no measure of the presiding genius is possible. These divisions range themselves to my sight, roughly speaking, however, as scarce more than three in number—I mean if the ten volumes of the Œuvres Critiques and the Théâtre be left out of account. The critical volumes in especial abound in the characteristic, as they were also a wondrous addition to his sum of achievement during his most strenuous years. But I am forced not to consider them. The two groups constituted after the close of Les Rougon-Mac-

quart—" Les Trois Villes " and the incomplete " Quatre Evangiles "—distribute themselves easily among the three types, or, to speak more exactly, stand together under one of the three. This one, so comprehensive as to be the author's main exhibition, includes to my sense all his best volumes—to the point in fact of producing an effect of distinct inferiority for those outside of it, which are, luckily for his general credit, the less numerous. It is so inveterately pointed out in any allusion to him that one shrinks, in repeating it, from sounding flat; but as he was admirably equipped from the start for the evocation of number and quantity, so those of his social pictures that most easily surpass the others are those in which appearances, the appearances familiar to him, are at once most magnified and most multiplied.

To make his characters swarm, and to make the great central thing they swarm about " as large as life," portentously, heroically big, that was the task he set himself very nearly from the first, that was the secret he triumphantly mastered. Add that the big central thing was always some highly representative institution or industry of the France of his time, some seated Moloch of custom, of commerce, of faith, lending itself to portrayal through its abuses and excesses, its idol-face and great devouring mouth, and we embrace the main lines of his attack. In " Le Ventre de Paris " he had dealt with the life of the huge Halles, the general markets and their supply, the personal forces, personal situations, passions, involved in (strangest of all subjects) the alimentation of the monstrous city, the city whose victualling occupies so inordinately much of its consciousness. Paris richly gorged, Paris sublime and indifferent in her assurance (so all unlike poor Oliver's) of " more," figures here the

theme itself, lies across the scene like some vast ruminant creature breathing in a cloud of parasites. The book was the first of the long series to show the full freedom of the author's hand, though "La Curée" had already been symptomatic. This freedom, after an interval, broke out on a much bigger scale in "L'Assommoir," in "Au Bonheur des Dames," in "Germinal" in "La Bête Humaine" in "L'Argent," in "La Débâcle," and then again, though more mechanically and with much of the glory gone, in the more or less wasted energy of "Lourdes," "Rome," "Paris," of "Fécondité," "Travail" and "Vérité."

"Au Bonheur des Dames" handles the colossal modern shop, traces the growth of such an organisation as the Bon Marché or the Magasin-du-Louvre, sounds the abysses of its inner life, marshals its population, its hierarchy of clerks, counters, departments, divisions and sub-divisions, plunges into the labyrinth of the mutual relations of its staff, and above all traces its ravage amid the smaller fry of the trade, of all the trades, pictures these latter gasping for breath in an air pumped clean by its mighty lungs. "Germinal" revolves about the coal-mines of Flemish France, with the subterranean world of the pits for its central presence, just as "La Bête Humaine" has for its protagonist a great railway and "L'Argent" presents in terms of human passion—mainly of human baseness—the fury of the Bourse and the monster of Credit. "La Débâcle" takes up with extraordinary breadth the first act of the Franco-Prussian war, the collapse at Sedan, and the titles of the six volumes of The Three Cities and the Four Gospels sufficiently explain them. I may mention, however, for the last lucidity, that among these "Fécondité" manipulates, with an

amazing misapprehension of means to ends, of remedies to ills, no less thickly peopled a theme than that of the decline in the French birth-rate, and that "Vérité" presents a fictive equivalent of the Dreyfus case, with a vast and elaborite picture of the battle in France between lay and clerical instruction. I may even further mention, to clear the ground, that with the close of Les Rougon-Macquart the diminution of freshness in the author's energy, the diminution of intensity and, in short, of quality, becomes such as to render sadly difficult a happy life with some of the later volumes. Happiness of the purest strain never indeed, in old absorptions of Zola, quite sat at the feast; but there was mostly a measure of coercion, a spell without a charm. From these last-named productions of the climax everything strikes me as absent but quantity ("Vérité," for instance, is, with the possible exception of "Nana," the longest of the list); though indeed there is something impressive in the way his quantity represents his patience.

There are efforts here at stout perusal that, frankly, I have been unable to carry through, and I should verily like, in connection with the vanity of these, to dispose on the spot of the sufficiently strange phenomenon constituted by what I have called the climax. It embodies in fact an immense anomaly; it casts back over Zola's prime and his middle years the queerest grey light of eclipse. Nothing moreover—nothing "literary"—was ever so odd as in this matter the whole turn of the case, the consummation so logical yet so unexpected. Writers have grown old and withered and failed; they have grown weak and sad; they have lost heart, lost ability, yielded in one way or another—the possible ways being so numerous—to the cruelty of time. But the singular doom

of this genius, and which began to multiply its symptoms ten years before his death, was to find, with life, at fifty, still rich in him, strength only to undermine all the "authority" he had gathered. He had not grown old and he had not grown feeble; he had only grown all too wrongly insistent, setting himself to wreck, poetically, his so massive identity—to wreck it in the very waters in which he had formerly arrayed his victorious fleet. (I say "poetically" on purpose to give him the just benefit of all the beauty of his power.) The process of the disaster, so full of the effect, though so without the intention, of perversity, is difficult to trace in a few words; it may best be indicated by an example or two of its action.

The example that perhaps most comes home to me is again connected with a personal reminiscence. In the course of some talk that I had with him during his first visit to England I happened to ask him what opportunity to travel (if any) his immense application had ever left him, and whether in particular he had been able to see Italy, a country from which I had either just returned or which I was luckily—not having the Natural History of a Family on my hands—about to revisit. "All I've done, alas," he replied, "was, the other year, in the course of a little journey to the south, to my own *pays*—all that has been possible was then to make a little dash as far as Genoa, a matter of only a few days." "Le Docteur Pascal," the concluison of Les Rougon-Macquart, had appeared shortly before, and it further befell that I asked him what plans he had for the future, now that, still *dans la force de l'âge,* he had so cleared the ground. I shall never forget the fine promptitude of his answer—"Oh, I shall begin at once Les Trois Villes." "And

which cities are they to be? " The reply was finer still—" Lourdes, Paris, Rome."

It was splendid for confidence and cheer, but it left me, I fear, more or less gaping, and it was to give me afterwards the key, critically speaking, to many a mystery. It struck me as breathing to an almost tragic degree the fatuity of those in whom the gods stimulate that vice to their ruin. He was an honest man—he had always bristled with it at every pore; but no artistic reverse was inconceivable for an adventurer who, stating in one breath that his knowledge of Italy consisted of a few days spent at Genoa, was ready to declare in the next that he had planned, on a scale, a picture of Rome. It flooded his career, to my sense, with light; it showed how he had marched from subject to subject and had " got up " each in turn—showing also how consummately he had reduced such getting-up to an artifice. He had success and a rare impunity behind him, but nothing would now be so interesting as to see if he could again play the trick. One would leave him, and welcome, Lourdes and Paris—he had already dealt, on a scale, with his own country and people. But was the adored Rome also to be his on such terms, the Rome he was already giving away before possessing an inch of it? One thought of one's own frequentations, saturations—a history of long years, and of how the effect of them had somehow been but to make the subject too august. Was *he* to find it easy through a visit of a month or two with " introductions " and a Bædeker?

It was not indeed that the Bædeker and the introductions didn't show, to my sense, at that hour, as extremely suggestive; they were positively a part of the light struck out by his announcement. They defined the system on

which he had brought Les Rougon-Macquart safely into port. He had had his Bædeker and his introductions for "Germinal," for "L'Assommoir," for "L'Argent," for "La Débâcle," for "Au Bonheur des Dames"; which advantages, which researches, had clearly been all the more in character of being documentary, extractive, a matter of *renseignements*, published or private, even when most mixed with personal impressions snatched, with *enquêtes sur les lieux*, with facts obtained from the best authorities, proud and happy to co-operate in so famous a connection. That was, as we say, all right, all the more that the process, to my imagination, became vivid and was wonderfully reflected back from its fruits. There *were* the fruits—so it hadn't been presumptuous. Presumption, however, was now to begin, and what omen mightn't there be in its beginning with such complacency? Well, time would show—as time in due course effectually did. "Rome," as the second volume of The Three Cities, appeared with high punctuality a year or two later; and the interesting question, an occasion really for the moralist, was by that time not to recognise in it the mere triumph of a mechanical art, a "receipt" applied with the skill of long practice, but to do much more than this—that is, really to give a name to the particular shade of blindness that could constitute a trap for so great an artistic intelligence. The presumptuous volume, without sweetness, without antecedents, superficial and violent, has the minimum instead of the maximum of *value;* so that it betrayed or "gave away" just in this degree the state of mind on the author's part responsible for its inflated hollowness. To put one's finger on the state of mind was to find out accordingly what was, as we say, the matter with him.

It seemed to me, I remember, that I found out as never before when, in its turn, "Fécondité" began the work of drowning the edifice. "Fécondité" is physiological, whereas "Rome" is not, wheras "Vérité" likewise is not; yet these three productions joined hands at a given moment to fit into the lock of the mystery the key of my meditation. They came to the same thing, to the extent of permitting me to read into them together the same precious lesson. This lesson may not, barely stated, sound remarkable; yet without being in possession of it I should have ventured on none of these remarks. "The matter with" Zola then, so far as it goes, was that, as the imagination of the artist is in the best cases not only clarified but intensified by his equal possession of Taste (deserving here if ever the old-fashioned honour of a capital), so when he has lucklessly never inherited that auxiliary blessing the imagination itself inevitably breaks down as a consequence. There is simply no limit, in fine, to the misfortune of being tasteless; it does not merely disfigure the surface and the fringe of your performance—it eats back into the very heart and enfeebles the sources of life. When you have no taste you have no discretion, which is the conscience of taste, and when you have no discretion you perpetrate books like "Rome," which are without intellectual modesty, books like "Fécondité," which are without a sense of the ridiculous, books like "Vérité," which are without the finer vision of human experience.

It is marked that in each of these examples the deficiency has been directly fatal. No stranger doom was ever appointed for a man so plainly desiring only to be just than the absurdity of not resting till he had buried the felicity of his past, such as it was, under a great flat leaden slab. "Vérité" is a plea for science, as science, to Zola,

is *all* truth, the mention of any other kind being mere imbecility; and the simplification of the human picture to which his negations and exasperations have here conducted him was not, even when all had been said, credible in advance. The result is amazing when we consider that the finer observation is the supposed basis of all such work. It is not that even here the author has not a queer idealism of his own; this idealism is on the contrary so present as to show positively for the falsest of his simplifications. In "Fécondité" it becomes grotesque, makes of the book the most muscular mistake of *sense* probably ever committed. Where was the judgment of which experience is supposed to be the guarantee when the perpetrator could persuade himself that the lesson he wished in these pages to convey could be made immediate and direct, chalked, with loud taps and a still louder commentary, the sexes and generations all convoked, on the blackboard of the "family sentiment"?

I have mentioned, however, all this time but one of his categories. The second consists of such things as "La Fortune des Rougon," and "La Curée," as "Eugène Rougon" and even "Nana," as "Pot-Bouille," as "L'Œuvre" and "La Joie de Vivre." These volumes may rank as social pictures in the narrowest sense, studies, comprehensively speaking, of the manners, the morals, the miseries—for it mainly comes to that—of a bourgeoisie grossly materialised. They deal with the life of individuals in the liberal professions and with that of political and socal adventures, and offer the personal character and career, more or less detached, as the centre of interest. "La Curée" is an evocation, violent and "romantic," of the extravagant appetites, the fever of the senses, supposedly fostered, for its ruin, by the hapless

second Empire, upon which general ills and turpitudes at large were at one time so freely and conveniently fathered. "Eugène Rougon" carries out this view in the high colour of a political portrait, not other than scandalous, for which one of the ministerial *âmes damnées* of Napoleon III., M. Routher, is reputed, I know not how justly, to have sat. "Nana," attaching itself by a hundred strings to a prearranged table of kinships, heredities, transmissions, is the vast crowded *epos* of the daughter of the people filled with poisoned blood and sacrificed as well as sacrificing on the altar of luxury and lust; the panorama of such a "progress" as Hogarth would more definitely have named—the progress across the high plateau of "pleasure" and down the facile descent on the other side. "Nana" is truly a monument to Zola's patience; the subject being so ungrateful, so formidably special, that the multiplication of illustrative detail, the plunge into pestilent depths, represents a kind of technical intrepidity.

There are other plunges, into different sorts of darkness; of which the esthetic, even the scientific, even the ironic motive fairly escapes us—explorations of stagnant pools like that of "La Joie de Vivre," as to which, granting the nature of the curiosity and the substance laboured in, the patience is again prodigious, but which make us wonder what pearl of philosophy, of suggestion or just of homely recognition, the general picture, as of rats dying in a hole, has to offer. Our various senses, sight, smell, sound, touch, are, as with Zola always, more or less convinced; but when the particular effect upon each of these is added to the effect upon the others the mind still remains bewilderedly unconscious of any use for the total. I am not sure indeed that the case is in this respect better with the productions of the third order—"La Faute de

l'Abbé Mouret," "Une Page d'Amour," "La Rêve," "Le Docteur Pascal"—in which the appeal is more directly, is in fact quite earnestly, to the moral vision; so much, on such ground, was to depend precisely on those discriminations in which the writer is least at home. The volumes whose names I have just quoted are his express tribute to the "ideal," to the select and the charming—fair fruits of invention intended to remove from the mouth so far as possible the bitterness of the ugly things in which so much of the rest of his work had been condemned to consist. The subjects in question then are "idyllic" and the treatment poetic, concerned essentially to please on the largest lines and involving at every turn that salutary need. They are matters of conscious delicacy, and nothing might interest us more than to see what, in the shock of the potent forces enlisted, becomes of this shy element. Nothing might interest us more, literally, and might positively affect us more, even very nearly to tears, though indeed sometimes also to smiles, than to see the constructor of Les Rougon-Macquart trying, "for all he is worth," to be fine with fineness, finely tender, finely true—trying to be, as it is called, distinguished—in face of constitutional hindrance.

The effort is admirably honest, the tug at his subject splendidly strong; but the consequences remain of the strangest, and we get the impression that—as representing discriminations unattainable—they are somehow the price he paid. "Le Docteur Pascal," for instance, which winds up the long chronicle on the romantic note, on the note of invoked beauty, in order to sweeten, as it were, the total draught—"Le Docteur Pascal," treating of the erotic ardour entertained for each other by an uncle and his niece, leaves us amazed at such a conception of beauty,

such an application of romance, such an estimate of sweetness, a sacrifice to poetry and passion so little in order. Of course, we definitely remind ourselves, the whole long chronicle is explicitly a scheme, solidly set up and intricately worked out, lighted, according to the author's pretension, by "science," high, dry and clear, and with each part involved and necessitated in all the other parts, each block of the edifice, each "morceau de vie," *physiologically* determined by previous combinations. "How can I help it," we hear the builder of the pyramid ask, "if experience (by which alone I proceed) shows me certain plain results—if, holding up the torch of my famous 'experimental method,' I find it stare me in the face that the union of certain types, the conflux of certain strains of blood, the intermarriage, in a word, of certain families, produces nervous conditions, conditions temperamental, psychical and pathological, in which nieces *have* to fall in love with uncles and uncles with nieces? Observation and imagination, for any picture of life," he as audibly adds, "know no light but science, and are false to all intellectual decency, false to their own honour, when they fear it, dodge it, darken it. To pretend to any other guide or law is mere base humbug."

That is very well, and the value, in a hundred ways, of a mass of production conceived in such a spirit can never (when robust execution has followed) be small. But the formula really sees us no further. It offers a definition which is no definition. "Science" is soon said —the whole thing depends on the ground so covered. Science accepts surely *all* our consciousness of life; even, rather, the latter closes maternally round it—so that, becoming thus a force within us, not a force outside, it exists, it illuminates only as we apply it. We do em-

phatically apply it in art. But Zola would apparently hold that it much more applies *us*. On the showing of many of his volumes then it makes but a dim use of us, and this we should still consider the case even were we sure that the article offered us in the majestic name is absolutely at one with its own pretension. This confidence we can on too many grounds never have. The matter is one of appreciation, and when an artist answers for science, who answers for the artist—who at the least answers for art? Thus it is with the mistakes that affect us, I say, as Zola's penalties. We are reminded by them that the game of art has, as the phrase is, to be played. It may not with any sure felicity for the result be both taken and left. If you insist on the common you must submit to the common; if you discriminate, on the contrary, you must, however invidious your discriminations may be called, trust to them to see you through.

To the common then Zola, often with splendid results, inordinately sacrifices, and this fact of its overwhelming him is what I have called his paying for it. In "L'Assommoir," in "Germinal," in "La Débâcle," productions in which he must most survive, the sacrifice is ordered and fruitful, for the subject and the treatment harmonise and work together. He describes what he best feels, and feels it more and more as it naturally comes to him—quite, if I may allow myself the image, as we zoologically see some mighty animal, a beast of a corrugated hide and a portentous snout, soaking with joy in the warm ooze of an African riverside. In these cases everything matches, and "science," we may be permitted to believe, has had little hand in the business. The author's perceptions go straight, and the subject, grateful and responsive, gives itself wholly up. It is no longer a case of an uncertain smoky

torch, but of a personal vision, the vision of genius, springing from an inward source. Of this genius "L'Assommoir" is the most extraordinary record. It contains, with the two companions I have given it, all the best of Zola, and the three books together are solid ground—or would be could I now so take them—for a study of the particulars of his power. His strongest marks and features abound in them; "L'Assommoir" above all is (not least in respect to its bold free linguistic reach, already glanced at) completely genial, while his misadventures, his unequipped and delusive pursuit of the life of the spirit and the tone of culture, are almost completely absent.

It is a singular sight enough this of a producer of illusions whose interest for us is so independent of our pleasure or at least of our complacency—who touches us deeply even while he most "puts us off," who makes us care for his ugliness and yet himself at the same time pitilessly (pitilessly, that is, for *us*) makes a mock of it, who fills us with a sense of the rich which is none the less never the rare. Gervaise, the most immediately "felt," I cannot but think, of all his characters, is a lame washerwoman, loose and gluttonous, without will, without any principle of cohesion, the sport of every wind that assaults her exposed life, and who, rolling from one gross mistake to another, finds her end in misery, drink and despair. But her career, as presented, has fairly the largeness that, throughout the chronicle, we feel as epic, and the intensity of her creator's vision of it and of the dense sordid life hanging about it is one of the great things the modern novel has been able to do. It has done nothing more completely constitutive and of a tone so rich and full and sustained. The tone of "L'Assommoir" is, for mere "keeping up," unsurpassable, a vast deep steady tide on

which every object represented is triumphantly borne. It never shrinks nor flows thin, and nothing for an instant drops, dips or catches; the high-water mark of sincerity, of the genial, as I have called it, is unfailingly kept.

For the artist in the same general "line" such a production has an interest almost inexpressible, a mystery as to origin and growth over which he fondly but rather vainly bends. How after all does it so get itself *done?*—the "done" being admirably the sign and crown of it. The light of the richer mind has been elsewhere, as I have sufficiently hinted, frequent enough, but nothing truly in all fiction was ever built so strong or made so dense as here. Needless to say there are a thousand things with more charm in their truth, with more beguilement of every sort, more prettiness of pathos, more innocence of drollery, for the spectator's sense of truth. But I doubt if there has ever been a more totally *represented* world, anything more founded and established, more provided for all round, more organised and carried on. It is a world practically workable, with every part as functional as every other, and with the parts all chosen for direct mutual aid. Let it not be said either that the equal constitution of parts makes for repletion or excess; the air circulates and the subject blooms; deadness comes in these matters only when the right parts are absent and there is vein beating of the air in their place—the refuge of the fumbler incapable of the thing "done" at all.

The mystery I speak of, for the reader who reflects as he goes, is the wonder of the scale and energy of Zola's assimilations. This wonder besets us above all throughout the three books I have placed first. How, all sedentary and "scientific," did he get so *near?* By what art, inscrutable, immeasurable, indefatigable, did he arrange to

make of his documents, in these connections, a use so vivified? Say he was " near " the subject of " L'Assommoir " in imagination, in more or less familiar impression, in temperament and humour, he could not after all have been near it in personal experience, and the copious personalism of the picture, not to say its frank animalism, yet remains its note and its strength. When the note had been struck in a thousand forms we had, by multiplication, as a kind of cumulative consequence, the finished and rounded book; just as we had the same result by the same process in " Germinal." It is not of course that multiplication and accumulation, the extraordinary pair of legs on which he walks, are easily or directly consistent with his projecting himself morally; this immense diffusion, with its appropriation of everything it meets, affects us on the contrary as perpetually delaying access to what we may call the private world, the world of the individual. Yet since the individual—for it so happens—is simple and shallow our author's dealings with him, as met and measured, maintain their resemblance to those of the lusty bee who succeeds in plumping for an instant, of a summer morning, into every flower-cup of the garden.

Grant—and the generalisation may be emphatic—that the shallow and the simple are *all* the population of his richest and most crowded pictures, and that his " psychology," in a psychologic age, remains thereby comparatively coarse, grant this and we get but another view of the miracle. We see enough of the superficial among novelists at large, assuredly, without deriving from it, as we derive from Zola at his best, the concomitant impression of the solid. It is in general—I mean among the novelists at large—the impression of the *cheap*, which the author of Les Rougon-Macquart, honest man, never faithless for

a moment to his own stiff standard, manages to spare us even in the prolonged sandstorm of "Vérité." The Common is another matter; it is one of the forms of the superficial—pervading and consecrating all things in such a book as "Germinal"—and it only adds to the number of our critical questions. How in the world is it made, this deplorable democratic malodorous Common, so strange and so interesting? How is it taught to receive into its loins the stuff of the epic and still, in spite of that association with poetry, never depart from its nature? It is in the great lusty game he plays with the shallow and the simple that Zola's mastery resides, and we see of course that when values are small it takes innumerable items and combinations to make up the sum. In "L'Assommoir" and in "Germinal," to some extent even in "La Débâcle," the values are all, morally, personally, of the lowest—the highest is poor Gervaise herself, richly human in her generosities and follies—yet each is as distinct as a brass-headed nail.

What we come back to accordingly is the unprecedented case of such a combination of parts. Painters, of great schools, often of great talent, have responded liberally on canvas to the appeal of ugly things, of Spanish beggers, squalid and dusty-footed, of martyred saints or other convulsed sufferers, tortured and bleeding, of boors and louts soaking a Dutch proboscis in perpetual beer; but we had never before had to reckon with so literary a treatment of the mean and vulgar. When we others of the Anglo-Saxon race are vulgar we are, handsomely and with the best conscience in the world, vulgar all through, too vulgar to be in any degree literary, and too much so therefore to be critically reckoned with at all. The French are different—they separate their sympathies, multiply their possi-

bilities, observe their shades, remain more or less outside of their worst disasters. They mostly contrive to get the *idea*, in however dead a faint, down into the lifeboat. They may lose sight of the stars, but they save in some such fashion as that their intellectual souls. Zola's own reply to all puzzlements would have been, at any rate, I take it, a straight summary of his inveterate professional habits. " It is all very simple—I produce, roughly speaking, a volume a year, and of this time some five months go to preparation, to special study. In the other months, with all my *cadres* established, I write the book. And I can hardly say which part of the job is stiffest."

The story was not more wonderful for him than that, nor the job more complex; which is why we must say of his whole process and its results that they constitute together perhaps the most extraordinary *imitation* of observation that we possess. Balzac appealed to " science " and proceeded by her aid; Balzac had *cadres* enough and a tabulated world, rubrics, relationships and genealogies; but Balzac affects us in spite of everything as personally overtaken by life, as fairly hunted and run to earth by it. He strikes us as struggling and all but submerged, as beating over the scene such a pair of wings as were not soon again to be wielded by any visitor of his general air and as had not at all events attached themselves to Zola's rounded shoulders. His bequest is in consequence immeasurably more interesting, yet who shall declare that his adventure was in its greatness more successful? Zola " pulled it off," as we say, supremely, in that he never but once found himself obliged to quit, to our vision, his magnificent treadmill of the pigeonholed and documented—the region we may qualify as that of experience by imitation. His splendid economy saw him through, he la-

boured to the end within sight of his notes and his charts.

The extraordinary thing, however, is that on the single occasion when, publicly—as his whole manifestation was public—life did swoop down on him, the effect of the visitation was quite perversely other than might have been looked for. His courage in the Dreyfus connection testified admirably to his ability to live for himself and out of the order of his volumes—little indeed as living at all might have seemed a question for one exposed, when his crisis was at its height and he was found guilty of "insulting" the powers that were, to be literally torn to pieces in the precincts of the Palace of Justice. Our point is that nothing was ever so odd as that these great moments should appear to have been wasted, when all was said, for his creative intelligence. "Vérité," as I have intimated, the production in which they might most have been reflected, is a production unrenewed and unrefreshed by them, spreads before us as somehow flatter and greyer, not richer and more relieved, by reason of them. They really arrived, I surmise, too late in the day; the imagination they might have vivified was already fatigued and spent.

I must not moreover appear to say that the power to evoke and present has not even on the dead level of "Vérité" its occasional minor revenges. There are passages, whole pages, of the old full-bodied sort, pictures that elsewhere in the series would in all likelihood have seemed abundantly convincing. Their misfortune is to have been discounted by our intensified, our finally fatal sense of the *procédé*. Quarrelling with all conventions, defiant of them in general, Zola was yet inevitably to set up his own group of them—as, for that matter, without a sufficient collection, without their aid in simplifying and

making possible, how could he ever have seen his big ship into port? Art welcomes them, feeds upon them always; no sort of form is practicable without them. It is only a question of what particular ones we use—to wage war on certain others and to arrive at particular forms. The convention of the blameless being, the thoroughly "scientific" creature possessed impeccably of all truth and serving as the mouthpiece of it and of the author's highest complacencies, this character is for instance a convention inveterate and indispensable, without whom the "sympathetic" side of the work could never have been achieved. Marc in "Vérité," Pierre Froment in "Lourdes" and in "Rome," the wondrous representatives of the principle of reproduction in "Fécondité," the exemplary painter of "L'Œuvre," sublime in his modernity and paternity, the patient Jean Macquart of "La Débâcle," whose patience is as guaranteed as the exactitude of a well-made watch, the supremely enlightened Docteur Pascal even, as I recall him, all amorous nepotism but all virtue too and all beauty of life—such figures show us the reasonable and the good not merely in the white light of the old George Sand novel and its improved moralities, but almost in that of our childhood's nursery and schoolroom, that of the moral tale of Miss Edgeworth and Mr. Thomas Day.

Yet let not these restrictions be my last word. I had intended, under the effect of a reperusal of "La Débâcle," "Germinal" and "L'Assommoir," to make no discriminations that should not be in our hero's favour. The long-drawn incident of the marriage of Gervaise and Cadet-Cassis and that of the Homeric birthday feast later on in the laundress's workshop, each treated from beginning to end and in every item of their coarse comedy and

humanity, still show the unprecedented breadth by which they originally made us stare, still abound in the particular kind and degree of vividness that helped them, when they appeared, to mark a date in the portrayal of manners. Nothing had then been so sustained and at every moment of its grotesque and pitiful existence lived into as the nuptial day of the Coupeau pair in especial, their fantastic processional pilgrimage through the streets of Paris in the rain, their bedraggled exploration of the halls of the Louvre museum, lost as in the labyrinth of Crete, and their arrival at last, ravenous and exasperated, at the *guinguette* where they sup at so much a head, each paying, and where we sit down with them in the grease and the perspiration and succumb, half in sympathy, half in shame, to their monstrous pleasantries, acerbities and miseries. I have said enough of the mechanical in Zola; here in truth is, given the elements, almost insupportably the sense of life. That effect is equally in the historic chapter of the strike of the miners in "Germinal," another of those illustrative episodes, viewed as great passages to be "rendered," for which our author established altogether a new measure and standard of handling, a new energy and veracity, something since which the old trivialities and poverties of treatment of such aspects have become incompatible, for the novelist, with either rudimentary intelligence or rudimentary self-respect.

As for "La Débâcle," finally, it takes its place with Tolstoi's very much more universal but very much less composed and condensed epic as an incomparably human picture of war. I have been re-reading it, I confess, with a certain timidity, the dread of perhaps impairing the deep impression received at the time of its appearance. I recall the effect it then produced on me as a really luxuri-

ous act of submission. It was early in the summer; I was in an old Italian town; the heat was oppressive, and one could but recline, in the lightest garments, in a great dim room and give one's self up. I like to think of the conditions and the emotion, which melt for me together into the memory I fear to imperil. I remember that in the glow of my admiration there was not a reserve I had ever made that I was not ready to take back. As an application of the author's system and his supreme faculty, as a triumph of what these things could do for him, how could such a performance be surpassed? The long, complex, horrific, pathetic battle, embraced, mastered, with every crash of its squadrons, every pulse of its thunder and blood resolved for us, by reflection, by communication from two of the humblest and obscurest of the military units, into immediate vision and contact, into deep human thrills of terror and pity—this bristling centre of the book was such a piece of "doing" (to come back to our word) as could only shut our mouths. That doubtless is why a generous critic, nursing the sensation, may desire to drop for a farewell no term into the other scale. That our author was clearly great at congruous subjects—this may well be our conclusion. If the others, subjects of the private and intimate order, gave him more or less inevitably "away," they yet left him the great distinction that the more he could be promiscuous and collective, the more even he could (to repeat my imputation) illustrate our large natural allowance of health, heartiness and grossness, the more he could strike us as penetrating and true. It was a distinction not easy to win and that his name is not likely soon to lose.

LA CURÉE

CHAPTER I

On the drive home, the calash could make but little way against the obstruction of carriages returning by the edge of the lake. At one moment the block became such that it was even necessary to pull up.

The sun was setting in a pale gray October sky, streaked on the horizon with thin clouds. One last ray, falling from the distant shrubberies of the cascade, pierced the roadway, and flooded the long array of stationary carriages with pale red light. The golden glints, the bright flashes thrown by the wheels, seemed to have settled along the straw-coloured edges of the calash, while the dark-blue panels reflected bits of the surrounding landscape. And higher up, full in the red light that lit them up from behind, and gave effulgence to the brass buttons of their capes half-folded across the back of the box, sat the coachman and footman, in their dark-blue liveries, their drab breeches, and their yellow-and-black striped waist-coats, erect, solemn and patient, after the manner of well-bred servants who are in no way put out by a block of carriages. Their hats, adorned with black cockades, looked very dignified. The horses alone, a pair of splendid bays, snorted with impatience.

"Look," said Maxime, "Laure d'Aurigny, over there, in that brougham. . . . Do look, Renée."

Renée raised herself slightly, and blinked her eyes with the exquisite grimace caused by the shortness of her sight.

"I thought she had vanished from the scene," said Renée. . . . "She has changed the colour of her hair, has she not?"

"Yes," replied Maxime, laughing; "her new lover hates red."

Awakened from the melancholy dream that for an hour had kept her silent, stretched out in the back seat of the carriage as in an invalid's long-chair, Renée leaned forward and looked, resting her hand on the low door of the calash. Over a gown consisting of a mauve silk polonaise and tunic, trimmed with wide plaited flounces, she wore a little coat of white cloth with mauve velvet lapels, which gave her a look of great smartness. Her strange, pale, fawn-coloured hair, whose shade recalled the colour of good butter, was barely concealed by a tiny bonnet adorned with a cluster of Bengal roses. She continued to screw up her eyes with her look of an impertinent boy, her pure forehead furrowed by one long wrinkle, her upper lip protruding like a sulky child's. Then, finding that she could not see, she took her eye-glass, a man's double eye-glass framed in tortoise-shell, and, holding it in her hand without placing it on her nose, at her ease examined the fat Laure d'Aurigny, with an air of absolute calmness.

The carriages were still blocked. Among the massed dark patches made by the long line of broughams, of which numbers that autumn afternoon had crowded to the Bois, gleamed the glass of a carriage-window, the bit of a bridle, the plated socket of a lamp, the braid on the livery of a lackey perched on his box. Here and there a bit of stuff, a bit of a woman's dress, silk or velvet, flashed from an open landau. Little by little a deep silence had taken the place of all the bustle that now stood dead and motionless. The occupants of the carriages could distinguish the conversation of the people on foot. Silent glances were exchanged from window to window; and all ceased talking during this wait, whose silence was broken only by the creaking of a set of harness, or the impatient pawing of a horse's hoof. The blurred voices of the Bois died away in the distance.

All Paris was there, in spite of the lateness of the season:

the Duchesse de Sternich, in a chariot; Mme. de Lauwerens, in a smart victoria and pair; the Baronne de Meinhold, in an enchanting light-brown cab; the Comtesse Vanska, with her piebald ponies; Mme. Daste, with her famous black steppers; Mme. de Guende and Mme. Teissière in a brougham; little Sylvia in a dark-blue landau. And then there was Don Carlos, in mourning, with his solemn, old-fashioned liveries; and Selim Pasha, with his fez and without his tutor; the Duchesse de Rozan, in a miniature brougham, with her powdered livery; the Comte de Chibray, in a dog-cart; Mr. Simpson, driving his perfectly-appointed drag; and the whole American colony. Then, finally, two Academicians in a hired cab.

The front carriages were released, and one by one the whole line began to move slowly on. It resembled an awakening. A thousand lively coruscations sprang up, quick flashes played among the wheels, sparks flew from the horses' harness. On the ground, on the trees, were broad reflections of trotting glass. This glitter of wheels and harness, this blaze of varnished panels glowing with the red gleam of the setting sun, the bright notes of colour cast by the dazzling liveries perched up full against the sky, and by the rich costumes projecting beyond the carriage-doors, were carried along amid a hollow, sustained rumbling sound, timed by the trot of the horses. And the procession went on, with the same noise, the same effects of light, unceasingly and with one impulse, as though the foremost carriages were dragging all the others behind them.

Renée yielded to the first slight jolt of the calash, and lowering her eye-glass, threw herself back on the cushions. Shivering, she drew towards her a corner of the bearskin that filled the body of the carriage as with a sheet of silky snow, and plunged her gloved hands into the long, soft, curly hair. The wind began to blow from the North. The warm October day, which had given the Bois an aftermath of spring and brought the great ladies out in open carriages, threatened to end in a bitterly cold evening.

For a moment Renée remained huddled in the warmth of her corner, giving way to the pleasurable lullaby of wheels turning before her. Then, raising her head towards Maxime, whose eyes were calmly undressing the women spread out in the adjacent broughams and landaus:

"Tell me," she said, "do you really think that Laure d'Aurigny handsome? How you sang her praises the other day, when they were discussing the sale of her diamonds! . . . By the way, did you not see the necklace and the aigrette your father bought me at the sale?"

"Yes, he does things well," said Maxime, without answering, laughing mischievously. "He finds means to pay Laure's debts and to give diamonds to his wife."

Renée made a slight movement with her shoulders.

"Wretch!" she murmured, with a smile.

But Maxime was leaning forward, following with his gaze a lady whose green dress interested him. Renée had thrown back her head, and with half-closed eyes glanced listlessly at the two sides of the avenue, seeing nothing. On the right, copses and low-cut plantations with reddened leaves and slender branches passed slowly by; at intervals, on the track reserved for riders, slim-waisted gentlemen galloped past, their steeds raising little clouds of fine dust behind them. On the left, at the foot of the narrow grass-plots that run down intersected by flower-beds and shrubs, the lake, clear as crystal, without a ripple, lay as though neatly trimmed along its edges by the gardeners' spades; and on the further side of this translucent mirror, the two islands, with between them the gray bar formed by the connecting bridge, displayed their smiling slopes and the theatrical outlines of fir-trees and evergreens, whose black foliage, resembling the fringe of curtains cunningly draped along the edge of the horizon, was reflected in the water. This scrap of nature, that seemed like a newly-painted piece of scenery, lay bathed in a faint shadow, in a pale blue vapour which succeeded in lending to the background an exquisite charm, an air of entrancing artificiality.

On the other bank, the Châlet des Îles, as though newly varnished, shone like an unused toy; and the paths of yellow sand, the narrow garden walks that wind among the lawns and run along the lake, edged with iron hoops in imitation of rustic woodwork, stood out more curiously, in this last hour of daylight, against the softened green of grass and water.

Accustomed to the ingenious charms of this perspective, Renée, once more yielding to her languor, had lowered her eyelids altogether, and looked only at her slender fingers twisting the long hairs of the bearskin. But there came a jolt in the even trot of the line of carriages. And, raising her head, she nodded to two ladies lolling languidly, amorously, side by side, in a chariot which was nosily leaving the road that skirts the lake, in order to go down one of the side avenues. The Marquise d'Espanet, whose husband, lately an aide-de-camp to the Emperor, had just created a great scandal by allying himself with the discontented members of the old nobility, was one of the most prominent leaders of society of the Second Empire; her companion, Mme. Haffner, was the wife of a celebrated manufacturer of Colmar, a millionaire twenty times over, whom the Empire was transforming into a politician. Renée, a schoolfellow of the two inseparables, as people nicknamed them with a knowing air, called them by their Christian names, Adeline and Suzanne.

As, after smiling to them, she was about to sink afresh into her corner, a laugh from Maxime made her turn round.

"No, really, I feel too sad: don't laugh, I mean what I say," she said, seeing that the young man was watching her ironically, making merry over her huddled attitude.

Maxime put on a comedy voice:

"How unhappy we are: how jealous!"

She seemed quite amazed.

"I!" she said. "Jealous of what?"

And then added, with a pout of contempt, as though remembering:

"Ah, to be sure, that fat Laure! I had not given her a thought, believe me. If Aristide has, as you say, paid that woman's debts and saved her from having to pack up her trunks, it only proves that he is less fond of money than I thought. This will restore him to the ladies' good graces. . . . The dear man, I leave him every liberty."

She smiled, and pronounced the words "the dear man" in a voice full of friendly indifference. And suddenly, becoming very sad again, casting around her the despairing glance of women who do not know in what form of amusement to take refuge, she murmured:

"Oh, I should like to. . . . But no, I am not jealous, not at all jealous."

She stopped, doubtfully:

"You see, I am bored," she said at last, abruptly.

Then she sat silent, with her lips pressed together. The line of carriages still rolled along the lake with its even trot and a noise singularly resembling a distant water-fall. Now, on the left, there rose, between the water and the roadway, little bushes of evergreens with thin straight stems, forming curious little clusters of pillars. On the right, the copses and plantations had come to an end; the Bois opened out into broad lawns, into vast expanses of grass, with here and there a clump of tall trees; the green-sward ran on, with gentle undulations, to the Porte de la Muette, whose low gates, that seemed like a piece of black lace stretched on the level of the ground, could be distinguished at a very great distance; and on the slopes, at the places where the undulations sank in, the grass seemed quite blue. Renée stared fixedly before her, as though this widening of the horizon, these gentle meadows, soaked in the evening air, had caused her to feel more keenly the void in her existence.

After a pause she repeated, querulously:

"Oh, I am bored, bored to death."

"This is not amusing, you know," said Maxime, calmly. "Your nerves are out of order, undoubtedly."

Renée threw herself back in the carriage.

"Yes, my nerves are out of order," she replied, dryly.

Then she became motherly:

"I am growing old, my dear child; I shall soon be thirty. It's terrible. Nothing gives me pleasure. . . . You, who are twenty, cannot know. . . ."

"Was it to hear your confession that you brought me out?" interrupted the young man. "It would take the devil of a long time."

She received this impertinence with a faint smile, as though it were the outburst of a spoilt child that knows no restraint.

"I should recommend you to complain," continued Maxime. "You spend more than a hundred thousand francs a year on your dress, you live in a sumptuous house, you have splendid horses, your caprices are law, and the papers discuss each of your new gowns as an event of the most serious importance; the women envy you, the men would give ten years of their lives for leave to kiss the tips of your fingers. . . . Is what I say true?"

She nodded affirmatively, without replying. Her eyes cast down, she had resumed her task of curling the hairs of the bearskin.

"Come, don't be modest," Maxime continued; "confess roundly that you are one of the pillars of the Second Empire. We need not hide these things from one another. Wherever you go, at the Tuileries, at the houses of ministers, at the houses of mere millionaires, high or low, you reign a queen. There is not a pleasure of which you have not had your fill, and if I dared, if the respect I owe you did not restrain me, I should say. . . ."

He paused for a few seconds, laughing, then finished his sentence cavalierly:

"I should say you had bitten at every apple."

She moved no muscle.

"And you are bored!" resumed the young man, with droll

vivacity. "But it's scandalous! . . . What is it you want? What on earth do you dream of? "

She shrugged her shoulders to imply that she did not know. Though she kept her head down, Maxime was able to see that she looked so serious, so melancholy, that he thought it best to hold his tongue. He watched the line of carriages, which, when they reached the end of the lake, spread out, filling the whole of the open space. The carriages, packed less closely, swept round with majestic grace; the quicker trot of the horses sounded noisily on the hard ground.

The calash, on going the round to join the line, rocked in a way that filled Maxime with vague enjoyment. Then, yielding to his wish to crush Renée:

"Look here," he said, "you deserve to ride in a cab! That would serve you right! . . . Why, look at these people returning to Paris, people who are all at your feet. They hail you as their queen, and your sweetheart, M. de Mussy, can hardly refrain from blowing kisses to you."

A horseman was, in fact, bowing to Renée. Maxime had been talking in a hypocritical, mocking voice. But Renée barely turned round, and shrugged her shoulders. At last the young man made a gesture of despair.

"Really," he said; "have we come to that? . . . But, good God, you have everything: what do you want more? "

Renée raised her head. In her eyes was a glow of light, the ardent desire of unsatisfied curiosity.

"I want something different," she replied, in a low voice.

"But since you have everything," resumed Maxime, laughing, "there is nothing different. . . . What is the 'something different'? "

"What? " she repeated.

And she did not continue. She had turned right round, and was watching the strange picture fading behind her. It was almost night; twilight was falling slowly like fine ashes. The lake, seen from the front, in the pale daylight that still hovered

over the water, became rounder, like a huge tin dish; on either side, the plantations of evergreens, whose slim straight stems seemed to issue from its slumbering surface, assumed at this hour the appearance of purple colonnades, delineating with the evenness of their architecture the studied curves of the shores; and again, in the background, rose shrubberies, confused masses of foliage, whose large black patches closed up the horizon. Behind these patches shone the glow of the expiring sunset, that set fire to but a small portion of the gray immensity. Above this placid lake, these low copses, this singularly flat perspective, stretched the vault of heaven, infinite, deepened and widened. This great slice of sky hanging over this small morsel of nature caused a thrill, an undefinable sadness; and from these paling heights fell so deep an autumnal melancholy, so sweet and so heart-breaking a darkness, that the Bois, wound little by little in a shadowy shroud, lost its mundane graces, widened, full of the puissant charm that forests have. The trot of the carriages, whose bright colouring was swept away in the twilight, sounded like the distant voices of leaves and running water. All died away as it went. In the centre of the lake, in the general evanescence, the lateen sail of the great pleasure-boat stood out, strongly defined against the glow of the sunset. And it was no longer possible to distinguish anything but this sail, this triangle of yellow canvas, immeasurably enlarged.

Renée, satiated as she was, experienced a singular sensation of illicit desire at the sight of this landscape that had become unrecognizable, of this bit of nature, so worldly and artificial, which the great vibrating darkness transformed into a sacred grove, one of the ideal glades in whose recesses the gods of old concealed their Titanic loves, their adulteries, and their divine incests. And, as the calash drove away, it seemed to her that the twilight was carrying off behind her, in its tremulous veil, the land of her dream, the flagitious, celestial alcove in which her sick heart and weary flesh might at last have been assuaged.

When, fading into the shadow, the lake and the bushes showed

only as a black bar against the sky, Renée turned round abruptly, and, in a voice that contained tears of vexation, resumed her interrupted phrase:

"What? . . . something different, of course; I want something different. How do I know what! If I did know. . . . But, look here, I am sick of balls, sick of suppers, sick of that sort of entertainment. It is so monotonous. It is deadly. . . . And the men are insufferable, ah! yes, insufferable."

Maxime began to laugh. A certain eagerness became apparent under the aristocratic aspect of the woman of fashion. She no longer blinked her eyelids, the wrinkle on her forehead became more harshly accentuated; her lip, that was so like a sulky child's, protruded in hot quest of the nameless enjoyments she pined for. She observed her companion's laughter, but was too excited to stop; lying back, swayed by the rocking of the carriage, she continued in short, sharp sentences:

"Yes, certainly, you are insufferable. . . . I don't include you, Maxime, you are too young. . . . But if I were to tell you how ponderous Aristide used to be in the early days! And the others! the men who have been my lovers. . . . You know, we are good friends, you and I: I don't mind what I say to you; well then, there are really days when I am so tired of living this life of a rich woman, adored and worshipped, that I feel I should like to become a Laure d'Aurigny, one of those ladies who live like bachelors."

And on Maxime laughing still lower, she insisted:

"Yes, a Laure d'Aurigny. It would surely be less insipid, less monotonous."

She sat silent for a few minutes, as though picturing to herself the life she would lead if she were Laure. Then, with a note of discouragement in her voice:

"After all," she resumed, "those women must have their own annoyances too. There is nothing amusing in life. It is killing work. . . . As I said, one ought to have something different; you understand, I can't guess what; but something else, some-

thing that would happen to nobody but one's self, that would not be met with every day, that would give a rare, unknown enjoyment. . . ."

She spoke more slowly. She uttered these last words as though seeking something, giving way to absent reverie. The calash went up the avenue that leads to the entrance of the Bois. The darkness increased; the copses ran along on either side like gray walls; the yellow iron chairs upon which, on fine evenings, the middle-class loves to attitudinize in its Sunday best, filed away along the footways, all unoccupied, with the gloomy melancholy air common to garden furniture overtaken by the winter; and the rumbling, the dull rhythmical noise of the returning carriages passed down the deserted avenues like a sad refrain.

Maxime doubtless appreciated the bad form of thinking life amusing. Though young enough to give himself over to an outburst of contented admiration, his egoism was too great, his indifference too cynical, he already experienced too much real weariness, not to proclaim himself disgusted, sick, and played-out. And, as a rule, he took a certain pride in making the confession.

He threw himself back like Renée, and assumed a plaintive voice.

"Yes, you are right," he said; "it is killing work. As for that, I amuse myself no more than you do; I, too, have often dreamt of something different. . . . There is nothing so stupid as travelling. Making money: I prefer to run through it, though even that is not always so amusing as one at first imagines. Loving and being loved: we soon get sick of that, don't we? . . . Yes, we get sick of it!"

Renée made no reply, and he went on, desiring to astound her with a piece of gross blasphemy:

"I should like to have a nun in love with me. Eh? that might be amusing. . . . Have you never dreamt of loving a man of whom you would not be able even to think without committing a crime?"

But her gloom continued, and Maxime, seeing that she remained silent, concluded that she was not listening. She seemed to be sleeping with her eyes open, the nape of her neck resting against the padded edge of the calash. She lay listlessly thinking, a prey to the dreams that kept her depressed, and at times a slight nervous movement passed over her lips. She was softly overcome by the shadow of the twilight; all that this shadow contained of sadness, of discreet pleasures, of hopes unacknowledged, penetrated her, covered her with an air of morbid languor. Doubtless, while staring at the round back of the footman on his box, she was thinking of those delights of yesterday, of those entertainments that had so palled upon her, that she was weary of; she contemplated her past life, the instantaneous satisfaction of her appetites, the fulsomeness of luxury, the appalling monotony of the same loves and the same betrayals. Then, with a ray of hope, there came to her, with shivers of longing, the idea of that "something different" which her mind could not strain itself to fix upon. There, her dream wandered. Constantly the word that she strove to find escaped into the falling night, became lost in the continuous rolling of the carriages. The soft vibration of the calash was an impediment the more that prevented her from formulating her desire. And an immense temptation rose from the empty space, from the copses asleep in the shadow on either side of the avenue, from the noise of wheels and from the gentle oscillation that filled her with a delicious torpor. A thousand tremulous emotions passed over her flesh: dreams unrealized, nameless delights, confused longings, all the monstrous voluptuousness that a drive home from the Bois under a paling sky can infuse into a woman's worn heart. She kept both her hands buried in the bearskin, she was quite warm in her white cloth coat with the mauve velvet facings. She put out her foot, as she stretched herself in her feeling of well-being, and with her ankle lightly touched Maxime's warm leg; he took no notice of this contact. A jolt aroused her from her lethargy. She raised her head and with her gray eyes looked

strangely at the young man, who sat lounging in an attitude of sheer elegance.

At this moment the calash left the Bois. The Avenue de l'Impératrice stretched out straight into the darkness, with the two green lines of its fences of painted wood, which met at the horizon. In the side-path reserved for riders, a white horse in the distance cut out a bright patch in the gray horizon. Here and there, on the other side, along the roadway, were belated pedestrians, groups of black spots, making slowly for Paris. And right up above, at the end of the rumbling, confused procession of carriages, the Arc de Triomphe, seen from one side, displayed its whiteness against a vast expanse of sooty sky.

While the calash ascended at an increased pace, Maxime, charmed with the English appearance of the scene, looked out at the irregular architecture of the private houses on both sides of the avenue, with their lawns running down to the side-walks. Renée, still dreaming, amused herself by watching the gaslights of the Place de l'Étoile being lit, one by one, on the edge of the horizon, and as each of these bright jets splashed the dying day with its little yellow flame, she seemed to hear a mysterious appeal; it seemed to her that Paris flaring in its winter's night was being lighted up for her, and making ready for her the unknown gratification that her glutted senses yearned for.

The calash turned down the Avenue de la Reine-Hortense, and pulled up at the end of the Rue Monceau, a few steps from the Boulevard Malesherbes, in front of a large private house standing between a court-yard and a garden. The two gates, heavily ornamented with gilt enrichments, which opened into the court-yard were flanked by a pair of lamps, shaped like urns, and similarly covered with gilding, in which flared broad gas-jets. Between the two gates, the concierge lived in a pretty lodge vaguely suggestive of a little Greek temple.

Maxime sprang lightly to the ground as the carriage was about to enter the court-yard.

"You know," said Renée, detaining him by the hand, "we dine at half-past seven. You have more than an hour to dress in. Don't keep us waiting."

And she added, with a smile:

"The Mareuils are coming. . . . Your father wishes you to pay Louise every attention."

Maxime shrugged his shoulders.

"What a bore!" he murmured, peevishly. "I don't mind marrying, but wooing is too silly. . . . Ah! how nice it would be of you, Renée, if you would rescue me from Louise this evening."

He put on his comedy look, the accent and grimace which he borrowed from Lassouche whenever he was about to launch one of his constant conceits:

"Will you, stepmother dear?"

Renée shook hands with him in masculine fashion. And quickly, with nervous, jesting boldness:

"If I had not married your father, I believe you would have made love to me."

The young man appeared to think the idea very funny, for he was still laughing when he turned the corner of the Boulevard Malesherbes.

The calash entered and drew up before the steps.

These steps, which were broad and shallow, were sheltered by a great glass awning, with a scalloped bordering of golden fringe and tassels. The two stories of the house rose up above the servants' offices, whose square windows, glazed with frosted glass, appeared just above the level of the ground. At the top of the steps the hall-door projected, flanked by slender columns recessed into the wall, thus forming a slight break, marked at each story by a bay-window, and ascending to the roof, where it finished in a pediment. The stories had five windows on each side, placed at regular intervals along the façade, and simply framed in stone. The roof was cut off square above the attic windows, with broad and almost perpendicular sides.

But on the garden side the façade was far more sumptuous. A regal flight of steps led to a narrow terrace which skirted the whole length of the ground-floor; the balustrade of this terrace, designed to match the railings of the Parc Monceau, was even more heavily gilded than the awning or the lamps in the court-yard. Above this rose the mansion, having at either corner a pavilion, a sort of tower half enclosed in the body of the building, and containing rooms of a circular form. In the centre there bulged out slightly a third turret, more deeply contained in the building. The windows, tall and narrow in the turrets, wider apart and almost square on the flat portions of the façade, had on the ground-floor stone balustrades and on the upper stories gilded wrought-iron railings. The display of decoration was profuse to oppressiveness. The house was hidden under its sculpture. Around the windows and along the cornices ran swags of flowers and branches; there were balconies shaped like baskets full of blossoms, and supported by great naked women with straining hips, with breasts jutting out before them; then, here and there, were planted fanciful escutcheons, clusters of fruit, roses, every flower that it is possible for stone or marble to represent. The higher the eye ascended, the more the building burst into blossom. Around the roof ran a balustrade on which stood, at equal intervals, urns blazing with flames of stone. And there, between the bull's-eye windows of the attics, which opened on to an incredible confusion of fruit and foliage, mantled the crowning portions of this stupendous scheme of decoration, the pediments of the turrets, amid which reappeared the great naked women, playing with apples, attitudinizing amidst sheaves of rushes. The roof, loaded with these ornaments, and surmounted besides with a cresting of embossed lead, with two lightning conductors, and with four huge symmetrical chimney-stacks, carved like all the rest, seemed the supreme effort of this architectural firework.

On the right was a vast conservatory, built on to the side of the house, and communicating with the ground-floor through

the glass door of a drawing-room. The garden, separated from the Parc Monceau by a low railing concealed by a hedge, had a considerable slope. Too small for the house, so narrow that a grass-plot and a few clumps of evergreens filled it up entirely, it was there simply as a mound, a green pedestal on which the house stood proudly planted in its gala dress. Seen from the gardens, across the well-trimmed grass and the glistening foliage of the shrubs, this great structure, still new and absolutely pallid, showed the wan face, the purse-proud, foolish importance of a female parvenu, with its heavy head-dress of slates, its gilded flounces, and the rustling of its sculptured skirts. It was a reduced copy of the new Louvre, one of the most characteristic specimens of the Napoleon III style, that fecund bastard of every style. On summer evenings, when the rays of the setting sun lit up the gilt of the railings against its white façade, the strollers in the gardens would stop to look at the crimson silk curtains draped behind the ground-floor windows; and, through sheets of plate glass so wide and so clear that they seemed like the window-fronts of a big modern shop, arranged so as to display to the outer world the wealth within, the small middle-class could catch glimpses of the corners of chairs or tables, of portions of hangings, of patches of ceilings of a profuse richness, the sight of which would root them to the spot with envy and admiration, right in the middle of the pathways.

But at this moment the shades were falling from the trees, and the façade slept. On the other side, in the court-yard, the footman was respectfully assisting Renée to alight. At the further end of a glass covered-way on the right, the stables, banded with red brick, opened wide their doors of polished oak. On the left, as if for a balance, there was built into the wall of the adjacent house a highly-decorated niche, within which a sheet of water flowed unceasingly from a shell which two Cupids held in their outstretched arms. Renée stood for a moment at the foot of the steps, gently tapping her dress, which

refused to fall properly. The court-yard, which had just been traversed by the noise of the equipage, resumed its solitude, its high-bred silence, broken by the continuous song of the flowing water. And as yet, in the black mass made by the house where the first of the great autumn dinner-parties was presently to cause light to be set to the chandeliers, the bottom windows alone shed their light, all glowing and casting the bright reflections of a conflagration upon the little pavement of the court-yard, neat and regular as a draught-board.

Renée pushed open the hall-door, and found herself face to face with her husband's valet, who was on his way to the basement, carrying a silver kettle. The man looked magnificent, dressed all in black, tall, broad-shouldered, pale-complexioned, with the conventional side-whiskers of an English diplomat, and the solemn and dignified air of a magistrate.

"Baptiste," asked Renée, "has monsieur come in?"

"Yes, madame, he is dressing," replied the valet, with a bend of the head which a prince bowing to the crowd might have envied.

Renée slowly climbed the staircase, drawing off her gloves.

The hall was very luxurious. There was a slight sense of suffocation on entering. The thick carpets that covered the floor and the stairs, the broad red velvet hangings that concealed the walls and the doorways, made the air heavy with silence, with the tepid fragrance of a chapel. Draperies hung high, and the very lofty ceiling was decorated with bosses projecting from a trellis-work of golden ribs. The staircase, whose double balustrade of white marble had a hand-rail covered with crimson velvet, commenced in two slightly converging flights, between which, at the back, was placed the door of the big drawing-room. On the first landing an immense mirror filled the whole wall. Below, at the foot of the branching staircase, stood, on marble pedestals, two bronze-gilt women, bare to the waist, upholding great lamps set with five burners, whose bright light

was softened by ground-glass globes. And on both sides was a row of admirable majolica vases, in which rare plants displayed their growth.

Renée climbed the staircase, and at each step her image rose in the glass; she wondered, with the feeling of doubt common to the most popular actresses, whether she was really delicious, as people told her.

Then, when she had reached her rooms, which were on the first floor and overlooked the Parc Monceau, she rang for Céleste, her maid, and had herself dressed for dinner. This took fully an hour and a quarter. When the last pin had been inserted, she opened a window, as the room was very warm, and, leaning her elbows on the sill, sat thinking. Behind her, Céleste moved about discreetly, putting away the things.

A sea of shadow filled the gardens below. The tall, inky masses of foliage, shaken by sudden gusts of wind, swayed heavily to and fro as with the flux and reflux of the tide, the sound of their dead leaves recalling the lapping of waves on a pebbly beach. Only now and then this ebb and flow of darkness would be pierced by the two yellow eyes of a carriage, appearing and disappearing between the shrubberies, along the road connecting the Avenue de la Reine-Hortense with the Boulevard Malesherbes. In the presence of this autumnal melancholy, Renée felt her heart once more fill with sadness. She fancied herself a child in her father's house, in that still house in the Île Saint-Louis, where for two centuries the Bérauds du Châtel had sheltered their grim, magisterial gravity. Then she thought of the suddenness of her marriage, of that widower who had sold himself to become her husband and bartered his name of Rougon for that of Saccard, the two dry syllables of which, when she first heard them, had sounded in her ears with the brutal cadence of two rakes gathering up gold; he took her and cast her into this life of excess, in which her poor head was becoming more and more disordered every day. Then she fell to dreaming, with childlike joy, of the pleasant games of battledore she had

played with her little sister Christine in the old days. And how some morning she would wake from her dream of enjoyment of the past ten years, mad, soiled by one of her husband's speculations, in which he himself would go under. It came to her as a quick foreboding. The trees soughed more loudly. Renée, distressed by these thoughts of shame and punishment, yielded to the instincts, slumbering within her, of the honest old middle-class; she made a promise to the black night that she would reform, spend less on her dress, seek some innocent amusement, as in the happy school-days, when the girls sang "Nous n'irons plus aux bois," as they danced sweetly under the plane-trees.

At this moment, Céleste, who had been downstairs, returned, and murmured in her mistress's ear:

"Monsieur begs madame to go down. There are several people already in the drawing-room."

Renée shivered. She had not noticed the keen air that had frozen her shoulders. As she passed before the mirror, she stopped, glanced at herself automatically. She smiled involuntarily, and went downstairs.

Most of the guests had, in fact, arrived. She found downstairs her sister Christine, a young girl of twenty, very simply dressed in white muslin; her aunt Elisabeth, the widow of Aubertot the notary, in black satin, a little old woman of sixty, of an exquisite charm of manner; her husband's sister, Sidonie Rougon, a lean, mealy-mouthed woman, of uncertain age, with a face like soft wax, which the dull hue of her dress threw even more in the shade; then the Mareuils; the father, M. de Mareuil, who had just left off mourning for his wife, a tall, handsome man, shallow and serious, bearing a striking resemblance to the valet, Baptiste; and the daughter, that poor Louise, as she was called, a child of seventeen, puny, a little hump-backed, wearing with a sickly grace a white foulard dress with red spots; then a whole group of serious men, men with many decorations, official gentlemen with silent, sallow faces, and, further on, another group, young men these, with vicious looks and low-cut waist-

coats, standing round five or six ladies of extreme elegance, foremost among whom were the two inseparables, the little Marquise d'Espanet, in yellow, and the fair-haired Mme. Haffner, in violet. M. de Mussy, the horseman whose bow Renée had not acknowledged, was there too, with the restless look of a lover who feels his dismissal coming. And, among the long trains spread over the carpet, two contractors, two bricklayers who had made money, Mignon and Charrier, with whom Saccard was to settle a matter of business on the morrow, moved about heavily in their clumsy boots, their hands behind their backs, wretchedly unhappy in their dress-clothes.

Aristide Saccard, standing by the door, managed to greet each new arrival while holding forth to the group of serious men with his Southern twang and sprightliness. He shook his guests by the hand, with a cordial word of welcome. Short, mean in appearance, he bent and bowed like a puppet; and the most salient feature of all his shrill, cunning, swarthy little person was the red splash of the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, which he wore very wide.

Renée's entrance provoked a murmur of admiration. She was really divine. Upon a tulle skirt, garnished behind with a flow of flounces, she wore a body of pale-green satin, bordered with English lace, caught up and fastened with large bunches of violets; a single flounce adorned the front of the skirt, and bunches of violets, held together by garlands of ivy, fastened a light muslin drapery. Her head and bust appeared adorably gracious above these petticoats of regal fulness and richness overloaded. Her neck was uncovered down to the points of her breasts, her arms were bare and had clusters of violets at the shoulders: she seemed to emerge quite naked from her case of tulle and satin, similarly to one of those nymphs whose busts issue from the sacred oaks. Her white neck and shoulders, her supple body, seemed so happy already in their semi-freedom, that the eye expected every moment to see the bodice and skirts glide down, like the dress of a bather enraptured with her flesh. Her

fine yellow hair, gathered up high, helmet-shaped, with trailing through it a sprig of ivy retained by a knot of violets, still further accentuated her nudity by uncovering the nape of her neck, which was lightly shaded by little wanton curls, like threads of gold. Round her throat was a necklace with pendants, of brilliants of wonderful water, and on her forehead an aigrette made of sprigs of silver set with diamonds. And so she stood for some seconds on the threshold, erect in the magnificence of her dress, her shoulders shimmering in the hot light like watered silk. She had come down quickly, and was a little out of breath. Her eyes, which the blackness of the Parc Monceau had filled with shadow, blinked in that quick flood of light, giving her that air of hesitation of the short-sighted which in her was so gracious.

On perceiving her, the little marquise sprang from her seat, came running up to her, took her by both hands, and, examining her from head to foot, murmured in fluted tones:

"You dear, beautiful creature. . . ."

Meanwhile there was much moving about; all the guests came and did homage to the beautiful Mme. Saccard, as Renée was known to everyone in society. She touched hands with most of the men. Then she kissed Christine, and asked after her father, who never came to the house in the Parc Monceau. And smiling, still bowing, her arms languidly rounded, she remained standing before the circle of ladies, who examined anxiously the necklace and the aigrette.

The fair-haired Mme. Haffner could no longer withstand the temptation. She drew nearer, and after a wistful look at the gems, asked with envy in her voice:

"That is the necklace and aigrette, is it not?"

Renée nodded. Thereupon all the women burst out into praise; the jewels were delicious, divine; then they proceeded to discuss, with admiration full of envy, Laure d'Aurigny's sale, at which Saccard had bought them for his wife; they complained that those creatures got the prettiest of everything: soon there would be no diamonds left for the honest women. And through

their complaints there filtered the longing to feel on their bare skins some of the jewellery that all Paris had seen on the shoulders of a noted courtesan, that might perhaps whisper in their ears scandals of the alcoves in which the thoughts of these great ladies so gladly lingered. They knew of the high prices, they mentioned a gorgeous cashmere shawl, some magnificent lace. The aigrette had cost fifteen thousand francs, the necklace fifty thousand. These figures roused Mme. d'Espanet to enthusiasm. She called Saccard over, exclaiming:

"Come and let me congratulate you! What a good husband you are!"

Aristide Saccard came up, bowed, made little of it. But his grinning features betrayed a lively satisfaction. And he watched from the corner of his eye the two contractors, the two bricklayers who had made their fortunes, as they stood a few steps off, listening with evident respect to the sound of such figures as fifteen and fifty thousand francs.

At this moment Maxime, who had just come in, charmingly pinched in his dress-clothes, leant familiarly on his father's shoulder, and whispered to him as to a schoolfellow, glancing towards the bricklayers. Saccard wore the discreet smile of an actor called before the curtain.

Some more guests arrived. There were at least thirty persons in the drawing-room. Conversation was resumed; in intervals of silence the faint clatter of silver and crockery was heard through the walls. At last Baptiste opened the folding-doors, and majestically pronounced the sacramental phrase:

"Dinner is served, madame."

Then, slowly, the procession formed. Saccard gave his arm to the little marquise; Renée took the arm of an old gentleman, a senator, the Baron Gouraud, before whom everybody bowed down with great humility; as to Maxime, he was obliged to offer his arm to Louise de Mareuil; then followed the rest of the guests, in double file; and right at the end, the two contractors, swinging their arms.

The dining-room was a huge, square room, whose wainscotting of stained and varnished pear-wood rose to the height of a man, and was decorated with slender beadings of gold. The four large panels had evidently been prepared so that they might be filled up with paintings of still life; but this had never been done, the landlord having doubtless recoiled before a purely artistic expenditure. They had been hung simply with dark-green velvet. The chairs, curtains, and door-hangings of the same material gave the room a look of sober seriousness, calculated to concentrate on the table all the splendour of the light.

And indeed, at this hour, the table, standing in the centre of the wide, dark Persian carpet, which deadened the sounds of the footsteps, and under the glaring light of the chandelier, surrounded by chairs whose black backs, with fillets of gold, encircled it with a dark frame, seemed like an altar, like a mortuary chapel, as the bright scintillations of the crystal glass and silver plate sparkled on the dazzling whiteness of the cloth. Beyond the carved chair-backs, one could just perceive, in a floating shadow, the wainscotting of the walls, a large low sideboard, ends of velvet hanging here and there. The eye was of necessity drawn back to the table, and became filled with the splendour of it. A beautiful dead-silver centre-piece, glittering with its chased work, stood in the middle of the table; it represented a troop of satyrs carrying off nymphs; above the group, issuing from a large cornucopia, an enormous bouquet of real flowers hung down in clusters. At either end of the table stood vases with more flowers, a pair of candelabra, matching the centre group, and each consisting of a satyr running off with a swooning woman on one arm, and holding in the other a ten-branched candlestick which added the brilliancy of its candles to the lustre of the central chandelier. Between these principal ornaments the first dishes, large and small, were ranged symmetrically, flanked by shells containing the hors d'œuvre, and separated by porcelain bowls, crystal vases, flat plates and tall preserve-stands, filled with that portion of the dessert that was already on the

table. Along the line of plates ran an army of glasses, of water-bottles, of decanters, of salt-cellars, and all this glass was as thin and light as muslin, uncut, and so transparent that it cast no shadow. And the centre-piece and candelabra seemed like fountains of fire; sparks glittered in the burnished silver dishes; the forks, the spoons, and the knives with handles of mother-of-pearl were as bars of flame; colours kaleidoscopic filled the glasses; and, in the midst of this rain of light, of this mass of incandescence, the decanters threw red stains upon the white-hot cloth.

On entering, a discreet expression of felicity overspread the faces of the men, as they smiled to the ladies on their arms. The flowers imparted a freshness to the heavy atmosphere. Delicately the fumes of cooked food mingled with the perfume of the roses. The sharp odour of prawns predominated, and the sour scent of citrons.

Then, when each had found his name written on the back of his menu-card, there was a noise of chairs, a great rustling of silken dresses. The bare shoulders, studded with diamonds, separated by black coats, which served to throw up their pallor, added their creamy whiteness to the gleam of the table. The dinner began amidst little smiles exchanged between neighbours, in a semi-silence only broken as yet by the muffled clattering of spoons. Baptiste fulfilled his office of major-domo with his serious diplomatic attitudes; under his orders were, in addition to the two footmen, four assistants whom he only engaged for the great dinners. As he removed each dish to the end of the room and carved it at a side-table, three of the servants passed noiselessly round the table, dish in hand, naming the contents in an undertone as they handed them. The others served the wine, and saw to the bread and the decanters. The removes and entrées thus slowly went round and disappeared; the ladies' pearly laughter grew no shriller.

The guests were too many for the conversation easily to become general. Nevertheless, at the second course, when the

game and side-dishes had replaced the removes and entrées, and the generous wines of Burgundy, Pomard and Chambertin, succeeded the Léoville and Château-Lafitte, the sound of voices increased, and bursts of laughter caused the light glass to ring again. Renée, seated at the middle of the table, had on her right the Baron Gouraud, and on her left M. Toutin-Laroche, a retired candle-manufacturer, and now a Municipal Councillor, a director of the Crédit Viticole, and a member of the committee of inspection of the Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco, a lean, important person, whom Saccard, sitting opposite between Mme. d'Espanet and Mme. Haffner, addressed at one moment, in unctuous tones, as "My dear colleague," and at another as "Our great administrator." Next came the politicians: M. Hupel de la Noue, a provincial préfet, who spent eight months of the year in Paris; three deputies, among whom M. Haffner displayed his broad Alsatian face; then M. de Saffré, a charming young man, secretary to one of the ministers; and M. Michelin, the First Commissioner of Roads. M. de Mareuil, a perpetual candidate for the Chamber of Deputies, sat square, facing the préfet, whom he ogled persistently. As to M. d'Espanet, he never accompanied his wife into society. The ladies of the family were placed between the most prominent of these personages. Saccard had, however, kept his sister Sidonie, whom he had placed further off, for the seat between the two contractors, the Sieur Charrier on her right, the Sieur Mignon on her left, as being a post of trust where it was a question of conquest. Mme. Michelin, the wife of the First Commissioner, a plump, pretty, dark woman, sat next to M. de Saffré, with whom she carried on an animated conversation in a low voice. And at either end of the table were the young people, auditors to the Council of State, sons of useful fathers, budding millionaires, M. de Mussy, casting despairing glances at Renée, and Maxime, apparently quite vanquished by Louise de Mareuil, who sat on his right. Little by little they had begun to laugh very loudly. It was from their corner that the first outbursts of gaiety proceeded.

Meanwhile M. Hupel de la Noue enquired courteously:

"Shall we have the pleasure of seeing his Excellency this evening?"

"I fear not," answered Saccard with an air of importance that concealed a secret annoyance. "My brother is so busy. . . . He has sent us his secretary, M. de Saffré, to make his apologies to us."

The young secretary, whom Mme. Michelin was decidedly monopolizing, raised his head on hearing his name mentioned, and cried at random, thinking that he had been spoken to:

"Yes, yes, there is to be a cabinet council this evening at nine o'clock at the office of the Keeper of the Seals."

All this time, M. Toutin-Laroche, who had been interrupted, was continuing seriously, as though he were delivering a peroration amid the attentive silence of the Municipal Council:

"The results are superb. The city loan will be remembered as one of the finest financial operations of the period. Ah! messieurs . . . ."

But at this point his voice was again drowned in the laughter that broke out suddenly at one end of the table. In the midst of this outburst of merriment could be heard Maxime's voice, as he concluded an anecdote: "But wait, I have not finished. The fair equestrian was picked up by a road-labourer. They say she is having him brilliantly educated with a view to marrying him later on. No man but her husband, she says, shall boast of having seen a certain black mole just above her knee." The laughter redoubled; Louise laughed unreservedly, louder than the men. And noiselessly amid this laughter, as though deaf, a footman at this moment thrust his pale serious face between each guest, offering in a low voice slices of wild duck.

Aristide was annoyed at the want of attention paid to M. Toutin-Laroche. He repeated, to show that he had been listening:

"The city loan. . . ."

But M. Toutin-Laroche was not the man to lose the thread of an idea:

"Ah! messieurs," he continued when the laughter had subsided, "yesterday was a great consolation to us whose administration is exposed to such base attacks. They accuse the council of leading the city to destruction, and you see, no sooner does the city issue a loan, than they all bring us their money, even those who complain."

"You have performed wonders," said Saccard. "Paris has become the capital of the world."

"Yes, it is really astounding," interposed M. Hupel de la Noue. "Can you imagine that I, old Parisian that I am, no longer know my Paris. I lost my way yesterday in going from the Hôtel de Ville to the Luxembourg. It's astounding, astounding!"

There was a pause. All the serious people were now listening.

"The transformation of Paris," continued M. Toutin-Laroche, "will be the glory of the reign. The nation is ungrateful; it ought to kiss the Emperor's feet. As I said this morning in the council, when they were talking of the great success of the loan: 'Gentlemen, let those brawlers of the opposition say what they will; to plough up Paris is to make it productive.'"

Saccard smiled, and closed his eyes, as though the better to relish the subtlety of the epigram. He leant behind the back of Mme. d'Espanet, and said to M. Hupel de la Noue, loud enough to be heard:

"He is adorably witty."

Meantime, while they were discussing the alterations being made in Paris, the Sieur Charrier had been stretching out his neck, as though to take part in the conversation. His partner Mignon was fully occupied with Mme. Sidonie, who was giving him plenty to do. Saccard had been watching the two contractors from the corner of his eye since the commencement of dinner.

"The administration," he said, "has met with so much devo-

tion. Everyone was eager to contribute to the great work. Without the wealthy companies that came to its assistance, the city would never have done so well nor so quickly."

He turned round, and with a sort of fawning brutality:

"MM. Mignon and Charrier know something of that; they have had their share of the labour, and they will have their share of the glory."

The bricklayers who had made their fortunes received this uncouth compliment with radiant faces. Mignon, to whom Mme. Sidonie was saying, in her mincing tones: "Ah, monsieur, you flatter me; no, pink would be too young for me . . . ." left her in the middle of her sentence to reply to Saccard:

"You are too kind; we merely did our business."

But Charrier was more polished. He drank off his glass of Pomard, and managed to deliver himself of a phrase:

"The alterations of Paris," he said, "have given a living to the workman."

"And we may add," resumed M. Toutin-Laroche, "that they have given a magnificent impulse to industry and finance."

"And do not forget the artistic side of the question: the new thoroughfares are majestic in their beauty," added M. Hupel de la Noue, who prided himself on his taste.

"Yes, yes, it is a fine undertaking," murmured M. de Mareuil, for the sake of saying something.

"As to the cost," declared Haffner seriously, the deputy who never opened his mouth except on great occasions, "that will be for our children to bear, nothing could be fairer."

And as, in speaking, he looked towards M. de Saffré, who appeared to have given a momentary offence to the pretty Mme. Michelin, the young secretary, to shew that he had been following the conversation, repeated:

"Nothing could be fairer indeed."

Each member of the group of serious men at the middle of the table had had his say. M. Michelin, the Chief Commissioner,

smiled and wagged his head: this was his ordinary method of taking part in a conversation: he had smiles of greeting, of response, of approval, of thanks, of leave-taking, quite a pretty collection of smiles which saved him almost any necessity for speech, an arrangement which he looked upon as doubtless more polite and more favourable to his advancement.

Yet one other personage had kept silence, the Baron Gouraud, who munched his food slowly like a drowsy ox. Up to that moment he had appeared absorbed in the contemplation of his plate. Renée, who paid him every attention, received nothing for it but little grunts of satisfaction. And consequently it was a surprise to see him lift his head and observe, as he wiped his greasy lips:

"As a landlord, whenever I have a flat done up and painted, I raise the rent."

M. Haffner's expression: "The cost will be for our children to bear" had had the effect of arousing the senator. All discreetly clapped their hands, and M. de Saffré exclaimed:

"Ah, charming, charming, I must send that to the papers tomorrow."

"You are quite right, messieurs, these are good times we live in," said Mignon, by way of summing up, in the midst of the smiles and admiration aroused by the baron's epigram. "I know a few who have made a good thing out of them. You see, everything is fine so long as you make money by it."

These last words seemed to freeze the serious men. The conversation dropped flat, and each appeared to avoid his neighbour's eyes. The bricklayer's aphorism struck home, deadly as the paving-stone of la Fontaine's bear. Michelin, who happened to be beaming upon Saccard with a pleasant air, ceased smiling, very anxious lest he should seem for one instant to have applied the contractor's words to the master of the house. The latter threw a glance to Mme. Sidonie, who tackled Mignon afresh, saying, "And so you like pink, monsieur . . . ?" And Saccard paid an elaborate compliment to Mme. Espanet; his dark, sorry face

almost touched her milky shoulders, as she threw herself back and tittered.

They were at the dessert. The lackeys moved round the table at a quicker pace. There was a pause while the cloth was being covered with the remainder of the fruit and sweets. At Maxime's end of the table the laughter increased in brightness; Louise's little shrill voice was heard saying: "I assure you, Sylvia wore blue satin as Dindonette;" and another childish voice added: "Yes, but her dress was trimmed with white lace." Tepid fumes pervaded the air. The flushed faces seemed to be softened by a sense of inward felicity. Two lackeys went round the table serving Alicante and Tokay.

Renée had worn a look of vacancy ever since the beginning of dinner. She fulfilled her duties as hostess with a mechanical smile. At every outburst of merriment that came from the end of the table where Maxime and Louise sat side by side, jesting like boon companions, she threw a lurid glance in their direction. She felt bored. The serious men were too much for her. Mme. d'Espanet and Mme. Haffner looked towards her in despair.

"And what are the prospects of the forthcoming elections?" asked Saccard, suddenly, of M. Hupel de la Noue.

"Very promising," answered the latter, smiling: "only I have had no candidates appointed as yet for my department. The minister has not made up his mind, it would seem."

M. de Mareuil, who had thanked Saccard with a glance for broaching this subject, appeared to be on hot coals. He blushed, and bowed disconcertedly when the préfet turned to him and continued:

"I have heard much of you in the country, monsieur. Your extensive property there has won you many friends, and your devotion to the Emperor is well known. Your chances are excellent."

"Papa, isn't it true that little Sylvia used to sell cigarettes at Marseilles in 1849?" cried Maxime at this moment from the end of the table.

Aristide Saccard pretended not to hear, and his son continued in a lower tone:

"My father has known her intimately."

This aroused some smothered laughter. Meantime, while M. de Mareuil kept up his bowing, M. Haffner had resumed in sententious tones:

"Devotion to the Emperor is the only virtue, the only patriotism, in these days of self-interested democracy. Who loves the Emperor loves France. It would give us unfeigned pleasure if monsieur were to become our colleague."

"Monsieur will succeed," said M. Toutin-Laroche in his turn. "All large fortunes should gather round the throne."

Renée could bear it no longer. The marquise was stifling a yawn in front of her. And as Saccard was about to resume, she said to him, with her pretty smile:

"Take pity on us, dear, and spare us any more of your horrid politics."

Then M. Hupel de la Noue, with a préfet's gallantry, exclaimed that the ladies were right. And he began to tell an indecent story of something that had happened in his district. The marquise, Mme. Haffner, and the other ladies, laughed heartily at certain of the details. The préfet told his story in a very pungent style, with suggestions, reservations and inflections of voice that gave a very improper meaning to the most inoffensive expressions. Then they talked of the first of the duchesse's Tuesdays, of a burlesque that had been produced the night before, of the death of a poet, and of the end of the autumn racing-season. M. Toutin-Laroche, who had his amiable moments, drew a comparison between women and roses, and M. de Mareuil, in the confusion in which he had been plunged by his electoral expectations, gave vent to profound observations on the new fashion in bonnets. Renée retained her vacant look.

Meanwhile the guests had ceased eating. A hot breath seemed to have passed over the table, clouding the glasses, crumbling the bread, blackening the fruit-peel on the plates, and destroying the

fine symmetry of the cloth. The flowers drooped in the great cornucopia of chased silver. And the guests had a moment of self-oblivion, in the presence of the remains of the dessert, lacking the energy to rise from their seats. Leaning half forward, with one arm resting on the table, they had the listless aspect, the indefinite dejection, that accompanies the cautious, circumspect inebriation of men and women of fashion fuddling themselves by degrees. All laughter had subsided, and but few words were spoken. Much had been drunk and eaten, and the group of men with decorations were more solemn than ever. In the heavy atmosphere of the room, the ladies felt a dampness rising to their necks and temples. They awaited the signal to adjourn to the drawing-room, serious, a little pale, as though their heads were gently swimming. Mme. Espanet was pink all over, while Mme. Haffner's shoulders had assumed a waxen whiteness. And M. Hupel de la Noue examined the handle of his knife; M. Toutin-Laroche continued to fling disconnected sentences towards M. Haffner, who wagged his head in reply; M. de Mareuil mused, with his eyes fixed on M. de Michelin, who smiled upon him archly. As for the pretty Mme. Michelin, she had long ceased talking; very red in the face, she let one of her hands hang under the table, where it was doubtless held by M. de Saffré, who leant awkwardly against the edge of the table, with knit eyebrows and the grimace of a man solving an algebraical problem. Madame Sidonie, too, had made her conquests; the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, both leaning on their elbows with their faces turned towards her, seemed enraptured at receiving her confidences; she confessed that she loved everything that was made with milk, and that she was frightened of ghosts. And Aristide Saccard himself, his eyes half-closed, plunged in the beatitude of an amphitryon who realizes that he has conscientiously fuddled his guests, had no thought of leaving the table; with respectful tenderness he surveyed the Baron Gouraud laboriously digesting his dinner, his right hand spread over the white

cloth, the hand of a sensual old man, short, thick, blotched with purple patches and covered with short red hairs.

Renée drank up automatically the few drops of Tokay that remained at the bottom of her glass. Her face tingled; the little yellow hairs on her neck and temples escaped rebelliously as though moistened by a humid breath. Her lips and nose were nervously contracted, she had the silent expression of a child that has drunk neat wine. The good middle-class thoughts that had come to her as she sat looking at the shadows of the Parc Monceau were now drowned in the stimulation of food and wine and light, and of the disturbing surroundings, impregnated with hot breath and merriment. She no longer exchanged quiet smiles with her sister Christine and her aunt Elisabeth, both of them modest and retiring, barely uttering a word. With a stony glance she had compelled the poor M. de Mussy to lower his eyes. Though her thoughts were apparently wandering, and she carefully refrained from turning round, and remained leaning back in her chair, against which the satin of her bodice rustled gently, she allowed an imperceptible shudder of the shoulders to escape her at each renewed burst of laughter that came to her from the corner where Maxime and Louise were still making merry, as loudly as ever, amid the dying hum of conversation.

And behind her, on the edge of the shadow, his tall figure beetling over the disordered table and the torpid guests, stood Baptiste, pale and solemn, in the scornful attitude of a flunky that has gorged his masters. He alone, in the air laden with drunkenness, beneath the vivid light that was turning to yellow, continued correct, with his silver chain round his neck, his cold eyes, in which the sight of the women's shoulders kindled no spark, his air of a eunuch waiting on Parisians of the decadence and retaining his dignity.

At last Renée rose, with a nervous movement. All followed her example. They adjourned to the drawing-room, where coffee was served.

The large drawing-room was an immense, long room, with a sort of gallery that ran from one pavilion to the other, taking up the whole of the façade on the garden side. A large French window opened on to the steps. This gallery glittered with gold. The ceiling, gently arched, had fanciful scrolls winding round great gilt medallions, that shone like bucklers. Bosses and dazzling garlands encircled the arch; fillets of gold, resembling threads of molten metal, ran round the walls, framing the panels, which were hung with red silk; festoons of roses, topped with tufts of full-blown blossoms, hung down along the sides of the mirrors. An Aubusson carpet spread its purple flowers over the polished flooring. The furniture of red silk damask, the door-hangings and window-curtains of the same material, the huge ormolu clock on the mantel-piece, the porcelain vases standing on the consoles, the legs of the two long tables inlaid in Florentine mosaic, the very flower-stands placed in the recesses of the windows, oozed and sweated with gold. At the four corners of the room were four great lamps placed on pedestals of red marble, to which they were fastened by chains of bronze gilt, that fell with symmetrical grace. And from the ceiling hung three lustres with crystal pendants, streaming with drops of blue and pink light, whose hot glare drew a responding gleam from all the gold in the room.

The men soon withdrew to the smoking-room. M. de Mussy went up to Maxime and took him familiarly by the arm; he had known him at school, though he was six years his senior. He led him on to the terrace, and after they had lighted their cigars he complained bitterly of Renée.

"But tell me, what is the matter with her? I saw her yesterday, and she was charming. And to-day you see, she behaves to me as if all were over between us. What can I have done? It would be kind of you indeed, my dear Maxime, if you would question her and tell her how I am suffering for her."

"Ah! as for that—no!" replied Maxime, laughing. "Renée's nerves are out of order, and I am not disposed to

face a storm. You can settle your differences between yourselves."

And he added, after slowly puffing out the smoke of his havanna:

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"You want me to do a nice thing, don't you? "

But M. de Mussy spoke of the sincerity of his friendship, and declared that he was only waiting for an opportunity to give Maxime a proof of his devotion. He was very unhappy, he was so deeply in love with Renée!

" Very well then, I will," said Maxime at last, " I will speak to her, but I can promise nothing, you know: she is sure to send me to blazes."

They returned to the smoking-room and stretched themselves at full length in two great lounging-chairs. And there, during a good half-hour, M. de Mussy related his sorrows to Maxime; he told him for the tenth time how he had fallen in love with his stepmother, how she had condescended to notice him; and Maxime, while finishing his cigar, advised him, explained Renée's nature to him, pointed out to him how he should act in order to subjugate her.

Saccard came and sat down within a few paces of the young men, and M. de Mussy kept silence, while Maxime concluded by saying:

" If I were in your place, I would treat her very cavalierly. She likes that."

The smoking-room was at one end of the large salon: it was one of the round rooms formed by the turrets. It was fitted up very richly and very soberly. Hung with imitation Cordova leather, it had Algerian curtains and door-hangings, and a velvet-pile carpet of Persian design. The furniture, upholstered in maroon-coloured shagreen leather, consisted of ottomans, easy-chairs, and a circular divan that ran round a part of the room. The miniature chandelier, the ornaments on the table and the fire-irons were of pale-green Florentine bronze.

There remained behind with the ladies only a few of the

younger men and some old men with pale, flabby faces, who loathed tobacco. In the smoking-room reigned laughter and much free jesting. M. Hupel de la Noue diverted his fellow-guests by repeating the story he had told at dinner, embellished with exceedingly bawdy details. This was his specialty: he had two versions of every anecdote, one for the ladies and the other for men. Then, when Aristide Saccard entered, he was surrounded and complimented; and as he pretended not to understand, M. de Saffré told him, in a heartily-applauded speech, that he had deserved well of his country for preventing the fair Laure d'Aurigny from falling into the hands of the English.

"No, really, messieurs, you are mistaken," stammered Saccard, with false modesty.

"Go on, why try to excuse yourself?" cried Maxime humorously. "It was a very fine thing to do, at your time of life."

The young man, who had thrown away his cigar, went back to the drawing-room. A great many people had arrived. The gallery was full of men in evening clothes, standing up and talking in low tones, and of petticoats spread out wide along the settees. Flunkeys had begun to move about with silver salvers loaded with ices and glasses of punch.

Maxime, who wished to speak to Renée, passed through the full length of the drawing-room, knowing from experience the ladies' favourite sanctum. There was, at the opposite end to the smoking-room, to which it formed a pendant, another circular room which had been made into an adorable little drawing-room. This boudoir, with its hangings, curtains and portières of buttercup satin, had a voluptuous charm of an original and exquisite flavour. The lights of the chandelier, a piece of very delicate workmanship, sang a symphony in pale-yellow, amid all these sun-coloured silks. The effect resembled a flood of softened rays, as of the sun setting over a field of ripe wheat. The light expired upon the floor on an Aubusson carpet strewn with dead leaves. An ebony piano inlaid with ivory, two cabinets whose glass doors displayed a host of knickknacks, a Louis XVI table, a flower-

bracket heaped high with blossoms furnished the room. The settees, the easy-chairs, the ottomans, were covered in quilted buttercup satin, divided at intervals by wide black satin bands embroidered with gaudy tulips. And then there were low seats, and occasional chairs, and every variety of stool, elegant and bizarre. The woodwork of these articles of furniture could not be perceived; the satin and the quilting covered all. The backs were curved with the soft fulness of bolsters. They were like so many discreet couches in whose down one could sleep and love amid the sensual symphony in pale-yellow.

Renée loved this little room, one of whose glass doors opened into the magnificent hot-house built onto the side of the house. In the daytime it was here that she spent her hours of idleness. The yellow hangings, so far from extinguishing her pale hair, gave it a strange golden radiancy; her head stood out pink and white amid a glamour of dawn like that of a fair Diana awakening in the morning light; and this was doubtless the reason why she loved this room that threw her beauty into relief.

At present she was there with her intimate friends. Her sister and aunt had just taken their leave. None but the hare-brained remained in the sanctum. Half thrown back on a settee, Renée was listening to the confidences of her friend Adeline, who was whispering in her ear with kittenish airs and sudden bursts of laughter. Suzanne Haffner was in great demand; she was holding her own against a group of young men who pressed her closely, without losing her German listlessness, her provoking effrontery, cold and bare as her shoulders. In a corner Madame Sidonie in a low voice instilled her precepts into the mind of a young married woman with Madonna-like lashes. Further off stood Louise, talking to a tall, shy young man, who blushed; while the Baron Gouraud dozed in his easy chair in the full light, spreading out his flabby flesh, his wan, elephantine form in the midst of the ladies' frail grace and silken daintiness. And a fairy-like light fell in a golden shower all over the room, on the satin skirts with folds hard and gleaming as porcelain, on the

shoulders whose milky whiteness was studded with diamonds. A fluted voice, a laugh like a pigeon's cooing, rang with crystal clearness. It was very warm. Fans beat slowly to and fro like wings disseminating at each stroke into the languid air the musked perfume of the bodices.

When Maxime appeared in the doorway, Renée, who was listening absently to the marquise's stories, rose hastily as if to attend to her duties as hostess. She went into the large drawing-room, where the young man followed her. She took a few steps, smiling, shaking hands with people, and then, drawing Maxime aside:

"Well!" she whispered, ironically, "the burden seems a pleasant one; you no longer find it so stupid to do your own wooing."

"I don't understand," replied Maxime, who had come to plead for M. de Mussy.

"Yet it seems to me that I did well not to deliver you from Louise. You are getting on rapidly, you two."

And she added, with a sort of vexation:

"It was indecent to go on like that at dinner."

Maxime began to laugh.

"Ah, yes, we told one another stories. I did not know the little minx. She is quite amusing. She is like a boy."

And as Renée continued her grimace of prudish annoyance, the young man, who had never known her to shew such indignation, resumed with his urbane familiarity:

"Do you imagine, stepmamma, that I pinched her knees under the table? Hang it all, I know how to behave to my future wife! . . . . I have something more serious to say to you. Listen . . . . You are listening, are you not?"

He lowered his voice still more.

"Look here, M. de Mussy is very unhappy, he has just told me so. You know, it is not for me to reconcile you, if you have had a difference. But, you see, I knew him at school, and as he really seemed in despair, I promised to put in a word for him . . . ."

He stopped. Renée was looking at him in an indescribable manner.

"You won't answer? . . . . he continued. "No matter, I have delivered my message, and you can settle things as you please . . . . But, honestly, I think you are unkind. I felt sorry for the poor fellow. If I were you, I would at least send him a kind word."

Then Renée, who had not ceased to keep her eyes, filled with a glittering light, fixed upon Maxime, said:

"Go and tell M. de Mussy that he's a nuisance."

And she resumed her slow walk amidst the groups of guests, smiling, bowing, shaking hands with people. Maxime stood where he was, lost in surprise; then he laughed silently to himself.

In no way eager to deliver his message to M. de Mussy, he strolled round the large drawing-room. The reception was dragging itself to its end, marvellous and commonplace, like all receptions. It was close upon midnight; the guests were dropping off one by one. Not caring to go to sleep upon an unpleasant impression, he decided to look for Louise. He was passing before the hall-door, when he saw standing in the vestibule the pretty Madame Michelin, whom her husband was wrapping up daintily in a blue-and-pink opera-cloak.

"He was charming, quite charming," she was saying. "We talked of you all through dinner. He will speak to the minister; only it is not in his province . . . ."

And as a footman, close by them, was helping the Baron Gouraud on with a great fur coat:

"That's the old boy who could carry the thing through!" she added in her husband's ear, while he was tying the ribbon of her hood under her chin. "He can do anything he likes with the minister. To-morrow, at the Mareuil's, I must see what . . . ."

M. Michelin smiled. He carried his wife off gingerly, as though he had something valuable and fragile under his arm. Maxime, after glancing round to assure himself that Louise was

not in the hall, went straight to the small drawing-room. And he found her still there, almost alone, waiting for her father who had spent the evening in the smoking-room with the politicians. Most of the ladies, the marquise, Madame Haffner, had left. Only Madame Sidonie remained behind, explaining to some wives of officials how fond she was of animals.

"Ah! here is my little husband," cried Louise. "Sit down here and tell me where my father has fallen asleep. He must have fancied that he was already in the Chamber."

Maxime replied in a similar strain, and the two young people began laughing again as loudly as at dinner. Sitting on a very low stool at her feet, he ended by taking her hands, by playing with her as with a school-fellow. And, in fact, in her frock of white foulard with red spots, with her high-cut bodice, her flat breast, and her ugly, cunning little street-boy's head, she might have passed for a boy dressed up as a girl. Yet at times her shrivelled arms, her distorted form, would assume a pose of abandonment, and a light would flash from the depths of her eyes, still full of callowness; but not the least blush in the world was brought to her cheeks by Maxime's romping. And they both laughed on, thinking themselves alone, without perceiving Renée, who stood half-hidden in the middle of the conservatory, watching them from a distance.

A moment before, as she was crossing a walk, the sight of Maxime and Louise had suddenly caused Renée to stand still behind a shrub. Around her the hot-house, resembling the nave of a church, with an arched glass roof supported by straight, slender iron columns, displayed its fat vegetation, its masses of lusty verdure, its spreading rockets of foliage.

In the middle, in an oval tank level with the flooring, lived, with the mysterious sea-green life of water-plants, all the aquatic flora of the tropics. Cyclanthus-plants, displaying their streaks of variegated green, raised a monumental girdle around the fountain, which resembled the truncated capital of some cyclopean column. At either end, two tall tornelias reared their quaint

brushwood above the water, their dry, bare stems contorted like agonizing serpents, and let fall aërial roots, that seemed like a fisherman's nets hung up in the open air. Near the edge, a Javanese pandanus spread its cluster of green leaves streaked with white, thin as swords, prickly and fretted as Malay creeses. And on the surface, in the warmth of the tepid sheet of slumbering water, great water-lilies opened out their pink petals, and euryales trailed their round leaves, their leprous leaves, floating like the backs of monstrous blistered toads.

By way of turf, a broad edging of selaginella encircled the tank. This dwarf fern formed a thick mossy carpet of a light green shade. And beyond the great circular path, four enormous clusters of plants shot vigorously right up to the roof: palms, drooping gently in their elegance, spreading their fans, displayed their rounded crowns, hung down their leaves like oars wearied by their perpetual voyage through the blue; tall Indian bamboos rose straight, hard, slender, dropping from on high their light shower of leaves; a ravenala, the traveller's tree, reared its bouquet of huge Chinese hand-screens; and in a corner a plantain-tree, loaded with fruit, stretched out on all sides its long horizontal leaves, on which two lovers might easily recline clasped in each other's embrace. In the corners were Abyssinian euphorbias, deformed prickly cactuses, covered with loathly excrescences, oozing with poison. And beneath the trees the ground was carpeted with creeping ferns, adianta and pterides, their fronds outlined daintily like fine lace. Alsophilas of a taller species tapered upwards with their rows of symmetrical foliage, hexagonal, so regular as to have the appearance of large pieces of porcelain destined to hold the fruit of some titanic desert. The shrubberies were surrounded with a border of begonias and caladiums; begonias, with twisted leaves, gorgeously streaked with red and green; caladiums whose spear-headed leaves, white, with veins of green, looked like large butterfly-wings; bizarre plants, whose foliage lives strangely with the sombre or wan splendour of noisome flowers.

Behind the shrubberies, a second and narrower pathway ran round the green-house. There, on stages, half concealing the hot-water pipes, bloomed marantas, soft as velvet to the touch, gloxinias, purple-belled, dracœnas, resembling blades of old lacquer.

But one of the charms of this winter-garden was the four alcoves of verdure at the corners, roomy arbours closed in by thick curtains of creepers. Scraps of virgin forest had here erected their leafy walls, their impenetrable confusion of stems, of supple shoots that clung to the branches, shot through space in reckless flight, and fell from the arched roof like tassels of ornate drapery. A stalk of vanilla, whose ripe pods emitted a pungent perfume, trailed about a moss-grown portico; Indian berries draped the thin pillars with their round leaves; bauhinias with their red clusters, quisqualias with flowers pendant like bead necklaces glided, twined and intertwined like slim adders, endlessly playing and creeping amid the darkness of the growths.

And beneath arches, placed here and there between the beds of shrubs, hung baskets suspended from wire chains, and filled with orchids, fantastic plants of the air, which pushed in every direction their crooked tendrils, bent and twisted like the limbs of cripples. There were cypripediums, whose flowers resemble a wonderful slipper with a heel adorned with a dragon-fly's wings; ærides, so delicately scented; stanhopeas, with pale tiger flowers, which exhale from afar a strong and acrid breath, as from the putrid throats of the convalescent sick.

But what most struck the eye from every point of the walks was a great Chinese hibiscus, whose immense expanse of foliage and flowers covered the whole wall of the house on to which the conservatory was built. The huge purple flowers of this giant mallow, unceasingly renewed, live but a few hours. They resembled as who should say the eager, sensual mouths of women, the red lips, soft and moist, of some colossal Messalina, bruised by kisses, and ever reviving with their hungry, bleeding smiles.

Renée, standing by the tank, shivered in the midst of this

verdant magnificence. Behind her, a great sphinx in black marble, squatting upon a block of granite, turned its head towards the fountain with a cat's cruel and wary smile; and, with its polished thighs, it looked like the dark idol of this tropical clime. From globes of ground glass came a light that covered the leaves with milky stains. Statues, heads of women with necks thrown back, swelling with laughter, stood out white against the background of the shrubberies, with patches of shadow which distorted the mad gaiety upon their faces. Strange rays of light played about the dull, still water of the tank, throwing up vague shapes, glaucous masses with monstrous outlines. A flood of white light streamed over the ravenala's glossy leaves, over the lacquered fans of the latanias; while from the lace-work of the ferns fell drops of light in a fine shower. Up above shone the reflections from the glass roof, between the sombre tops of the tall palm-trees. And all around was massed in darkness; the arbours, with their hangings of creepers, were drowned in tenebrous gloom, like the lairs of slumbering serpents.

Renée stood musing beneath the bright light, watching Louise and Maxime in the distance. She no longer felt the fleeting fancies, the gray, twilight temptations of the chilly avenues of the Bois. Her thoughts were no longer lulled to sleep by the trot of her horses along the mundane turf, the glades in which middle-class families take their Sunday repasts. This time she was permeated with a keen and definite desire.

Unbridled love and voluptuous appetite haunted this stifling nave in which seethed the ardent sap of the tropics. Renée was wrapt in the puissant bridals of the earth which gave birth to those dark growths, those colossal stamina; and the acrid birth-throes of this hot-bed, of this forest expansion, of this mass of vegetation all glowing with the entrails that nourished it, surrounded her with perturbing effluvia full of intoxication. At her feet steamed the tank, the mass of tepid water thickened by the saps from the floating roots, enveloping her shoulders

with a mantle of heavy vapours; a mist that warmed her skin like the touch of a hand moist with concupiscence. Overhead she could smell the palm-trees whose tall leaves shook down their aroma. And more than the stifling heat of the air, more than the brilliant light, more than the great dazzling flowers, like faces laughing or grimacing between the leaves, it was the odours, above all, that overpowered her. An indescribable perfume, potent, provocative, composed of a thousand perfumes, hung about her; human exudation, the breath of women, the scent of hair; and zephyrs sweet and swooningly faint were blended with zephyrs coarse, pestilential, laden with poison. But, amid this rare music of odours, the dominant melody that constantly returned, stifling the sweetness of the vanilla and the orchids' stridency, was that penetrating, sensual smell of flesh, that smell of love escaping in the morning hour from the close chamber of a bridegroom and bride.

Renée sank back slowly, leaning against the granite pedestal. In her dress of green satin, her head and breast flushed and bedewed with the bright scintillations of her diamonds, she resembled a great flower, green and pink, one of the water-lilies from the tank, swooning with heat. In this moment of enlightenment, all her good resolutions vanished for ever, the intoxication of dinner returned to her head, arrogant, triumphant, redoubled in force by the flames of the hot-house. She thought no longer of the freshness of the night, that had calmed her, of the murmuring shadows of the gardens, whose voices had whispered in her ear the bliss of serenity. In her were aroused the senses of a woman who desires, the caprices of a woman who is satiated. And above her head, the great black marble sphinx laughed its mystic laugh, as if it had read the longing, formulated at last, that galvanized that dead heart, the fugitive longing, the "something different" vainly sought for by Renée in the rocking of her calash, in the fine ashes of the falling night, and now suddenly revealed to her beneath the dazzling

light of this blazing garden by the sight of Maxime and Louise, laughing and playing, their hands interlocked.

Now a sound of voices issued from an adjacent arbour into which Aristide Saccard had led the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier.

"No, Monsieur Saccard," said the latter's fat voice, "we really cannot take that back at more than two hundred francs the mètre."

And Saccard's shrill tones retorted:

"But in my share you valued each mètre of frontage at two hundred and fifty francs."

"Well, listen, we will make it two hundred and twenty-five francs."

And the voices went on, coarse, sounding strangely under the clumps of drooping palm-trees. But they passed like an empty noise through Renée's dream, as there rose before her, with the fatal summons experienced by one looking over a precipice, an unknown joyance, hot with crime, more violent than all those which she had already drained, the last that remained in her cup. She felt weary no longer.

The shrub that half concealed her was a malignant plant, a Madagascar tanghin-tree with broad box-like leaves with whitish stems, whose smallest veins distilled a venomous fluid. And at a moment when Louise and Maxime laughed more loudly in the yellow refraction, in the sunset of the little boudoir, Renée, her mind wandering, her mouth parched and stung, took between her lips a sprig of the tanghin-tree which came to the level of her teeth, and closed them on one of its bitter leaves.

CHAPTER II

Aristide Rougon swept down upon Paris on the morrow of the 2 Décembre, like a carrion bird that scents the field of battle from afar. He came from Plassans, a sous-préfecture in the south, where his father had at length, in the troubled waters of events, netted a long-coveted appointment as receiver of taxes. He himself, still young, had compromised himself like a fool, without fame or profit, and could consider himself fortunate to have emerged safe and sound from the scrimmage. He came with a rush, furious at having taken a false step, cursing the country, talking of Paris with the ravenous hunger of a wolf, swearing "that he would never be such an ass again;" and the bitter smile which accompanied these words assumed a terrible significance on his thin lips.

He arrived in the early days of 1852. He brought with him his wife Angèle, a fair-haired, insipid person, whom he installed in a cramped lodging in the Rue Saint-Jacques, like an inconvenient piece of furniture that he was eager to get out of the way. The young wife had refused to be separated from her daughter, little Clotilde, a child of four, whom the father would gladly have left behind in the care of his family. But he had only yielded to Angèle's desire on the stipulation that the college at Plassans should remain the home of their son Maxime, a scapegrace of eleven, whom his grandmother had promised to look after. Aristide wanted to have his hands free: a wife and a child already seemed to him a crushing burden for a man decided to surmount every obstacle, not caring whether he got rolled in the mud or broke his back in the attempt.

On the very night of his arrival, while Angèle was unpacking the trunks, he felt a keen desire to explore Paris, to tread with his clodhopping shoes the burning stones from which he hoped to

extract millions of money. He simply took possession of the city. He walked for the sake of walking, going along the pavements as though he were in a conquered country. He saw before him clearly the battle he had come to fight, and he felt no repugnance in comparing himself to a skilful picklock who was about, by ruse or violence to seize his share of the common wealth which so far had been malignantly denied him. Had he felt the need of an excuse, he would have invoked his desires, which had for ten years been stifled, his wretched provincial existence, and above all his mistakes, for which he held society at large responsible. But at this moment, amid this emotion of the gambler who at last places his eager hands on the green cloth, he felt nothing but joy, a joy all his own, in which were mingled the gratification of covetousness and the expectations of unpunished roguery. The Paris air intoxicated him; he thought he could hear in the rumbling of the carriages the voices from *Macbeth* calling to him: "Thou shalt be rich!" For close upon two hours he thus walked from street to street, tasting the delights of a man who gives play to his vices. He had not been back in Paris since the happy year which he had spent there as a student. The night fell: his dream grew in the bright light thrown on the pavement by the shops and cafés; he lost himself.

When he raised his eyes, he found he was in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, near the middle. One of his brothers, Eugène Rougon, lived in an adjacent street, the Rue Penthièvre. When coming to Paris, Aristide had reckoned particularly upon Eugène, who, after having been one of the most active participators in the Coup d'État, was now an occult force, a lawyer of small account about to develop into a politician of great importance. But with the superstition of a gambler, Aristide decided not to knock at his brother's door that evening. He returned slowly to the Rue Saint-Jacques, thinking of Eugène with a dull feeling of jealousy, contemplating his shabby clothes still covered with the dust of the journey, and seeking consolation in the resumption of his dream of wealth. But even this dream had turned to bitterness.

After starting out for the sake of expansion, and being exhilarated by the bustling activity of the Paris shops, he returned home irritated by the happiness that seemed to him to fill the streets, intensified his ferocity, picturing to himself relentless struggles in which he would take delight in beating and cheating the crowd that had jostled him on the pavement. Never had he known an appetite so vast, an eagerness so pressing for enjoyment.

At daybreak the next morning he was at his brother's. Eugène lived in two large, cold, barely-furnished rooms, that chilled Aristide to the marrow. He had looked to find his brother wallowing in the lap of luxury. Eugène was working at a small black table. All he said was, with a smile, in his slow voice:

"Ah! there you are, I was expecting you."

Aristide was very bitter. He accused Eugène of leaving him to vegetate, of not even having had the charity to give him a word of good advice while he was floundering about in the country. He could never forgive himself for remaining a Republican up to the 2 Décembre; it was an open sore with him, an everlasting confusion. Eugène had quietly taken up his pen. When the other had finished:

"Bah!" he said. "All mistakes can be set right. You have a career before you full of promise."

He spoke these words in so decided a voice, with a look so piercing, that Aristide lowered his head, feeling that his brother was penetrating into the very depths of his nature. The latter continued with friendly bluntness:

"You have come here to ask me to find you an appointment, have you not? I have been thinking of you, but I have heard of nothing yet. You understand, I must be careful where I put you. What you want is a place where you can feather your nest without danger either to yourself or to me . . . . Don't trouble to protest, we are quite alone, we can say what we like . . . ."

Aristide thought it best to laugh.

"Oh, I know you have your wits about you," Eugène con-

tinued, "and that you are not likely to make a fool of yourself for no purpose . . . . As soon as a good opportunity presents itself, I will give you the berth. Meantime, whenever you want twenty francs or so, come and ask me for it."

They talked an instant of the rising in the South, through which their father had gained his appointment as receiver of taxes. Eugène dressed himself while they were talking. As he was about to take leave of his brother downstairs in the street, he detained him a moment longer, and said to him in a lower tone of voice:

"You will do me a favour by not seeking work on your own account, but by waiting at home quietly for the appointment which I promise you . . . . I should not like to see my brother hanging about in people's waiting-rooms."

Aristide had a certain respect for Eugène, whom he looked upon as an uncommonly smart chap. He could not forgive his distrustfulness, nor his candour, which was a trifle blunt; still he went home obediently and shut himself up in the Rue Saint-Jacques. He had arrived with five hundred francs which had been lent him by his wife's father. After paying the expenses of the journey, he made the three hundred francs that remained last him a month. Angèle was a great eater; moreover she thought it necessary to trim her Sunday dress with a fresh set of mauve ribbons. That month of waiting seemed endless to Aristide. He was consumed with impatience. When he sat at his window and watched the gigantic labour of Paris seething beneath him, he was struck with an insane desire to hurl himself straightway into the furnace, in order with his fevered hands to mould the gold like soft wax. He inhaled the breath, vague as yet, that rose from the great city, that breath of the budding Empire, laden already with the odours of alcoves and financial hells, with the warm effluvia of sensuality. The faint fumes that reached him told him that he was on the right scent, that the game was scudding before him, that the great imperial hunt, the hunt after adventures, women, and millions, was at last about

to commence. His nostrils quivered, his instinct, the instinct of a famished beast, dexterously seized upon the slightest indications of the division of spoil of which the city was to be the arena.

Twice he called on his brother, to urge him to greater activity. Eugène received him gruffly, told him again that he was not forgetting him, but that he must have patience. He at last received a letter asking him to call at the Rue Penthièvre. He went, his heart beating violently, as though he was on his way to an assignation. He found Eugène sitting before his everlasting little black table in the great bleak room which he used as a study. So soon as he saw him, the lawyer handed him a document, and said:

"There, I got your business settled yesterday. This is your appointment as an assistant surveying-clerk at the Hôtel de Ville. Your salary will be two thousand four hundred francs."

Aristide remained where he stood. He turned pale, and did not take the document, thinking that his brother was making fun of him. He had expected an appointment of at least six thousand francs. Eugène, suspecting what was passing in his mind, turned his chair round, and, folding his arms, exclaimed, with a show of anger:

"So you are a fool, then, are you? . . . . You indulge in dreams like a girl. You want to live in a handsome flat, to keep servants, to eat well, to sleep in silken sheets, to take your pleasure in the arms of the first woman that comes, in a boudoir furnished in a couple of hours . . . . You and your sort, if you had your way, would empty the coffers even before they were full. But, good God, why can't you be patient? See how I live, and in order to pick up your fortune at least take the trouble to stoop."

He spoke with a profound contempt for his brother's schoolboy impatience. One could feel, through his rude speech, a higher ambition, a desire for unmitigated power; this candid craving for money must have seemed common to him, and puerile. He continued in a gentler voice, with a subtle smile:

"No doubt you have excellent propensities, and I have no wish to thwart them. Men like you are worth much to us. We fully

intend to choose our best friends from among the hungriest. Set your mind at rest, we shall keep open table, and the most unbounded appetites shall be satisfied. It is, after all, the easiest way of governing . . . . But for Heaven's sake wait till the cloth is laid; and, if you take my advice, you will go to the kitchen yourself and fetch your own knife and fork."

Aristide still remained sullen. His brother's metaphorical humour in no way raised his spirits. And Eugène once more gave vent to his anger.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I was right in my first opinion: you are a fool . . . . Why, what did you expect, what did you imagine I was going to do with your illustrious person? You have not even had the spirit to finish your law studies; you bury yourself for ten years in a miserable clerkship in a sous-préfecture; and you come down upon me with the odious reputation of a Republican whom the Coup d'État alone was able to convert . . . . Do you think there is the making of a minister in you, with a record like that? . . . . Oh, I know you have in your favour your savage desire to succeed by any possible means. It is a great point, I admit, and it is that which I had in my mind when I got you this appointment in the Hôtel de Ville."

And rising, he thrust the nomination into Aristide's hands, and continued:

"Take it, and some day you'll thank me! I chose the place for you myself, and I know what you'll be able to get out of it . . . . You have only to look about you and to keep your ears open. If you know your way about, you will understand, and act accordingly . . . . Now remember carefully what I am about to add. We are entering upon a period when fortune will be within the reach of anyone. Make as much money as you like: I give you leave; only no folly, no flagrant scandal, or I'll exterminate you."

This threat produced the effect which his promises had not been able to bring about. All Aristide's ardour was rekindled at the thought of the fortune of which his brother spoke. It seemed to him that he was at last let loose in the fray, authorized to cut

throats, provided he did so legally, and without causing too much commotion. Eugène gave him two hundred francs to keep him till the end of the month. Then he paused, reflecting.

"I am thinking of changing my name," he said at last; "you should do the same . . . . We should be less in each other's way."

"As you like," answered Aristide quietly.

"You need take no trouble in the matter, I will attend to the formalities . . . . Would you like to call yourself Sicardot, your wife's name? "

Aristide raised his eyes to the ceiling, repeating the name and listening to the sound of the syllables:

"Sicardot . . . . Aristide Sicardot . . . . No, I wouldn't; it's clumsy and stinks of failure."

"Think of something else then," said Eugène.

"I would prefer Sicard simply," resumed the other after a pause: "Aristide Sicard . . . . That's not so bad, is it? . . . . a little frivolous, perhaps . . . ."

He thought a moment longer, and then, triumphantly:

"I have it, I've found it," he cried . . . . "Saccard, Aristide Saccard! . . . . with two c's . . . . Eh! there's money in that name; it sounds as if you were counting five-franc pieces."

Eugène's was a savage type of humour. He dismissed his brother, and said to him with a smile:

"Yes, a name that ought to make either a felon or a millionaire of you."

A few days later Aristide Saccard was installed at the Hôtel de Ville. He learnt that his brother must have had great influence to get him admitted without the usual examinations.

And then the household entered upon the monotonous life of a small clerk. Aristide and his wife resumed their Plassans habits. Only they had fallen from a dream of sudden fortune, and their poverty-stricken existence seemed the heavier to them since they had come to look upon it as a time of probation whose length they were unable to determine. To be poor in Paris is to

be doubly poor. Angèle accepted penury with the listlessness of a chlorotic woman; she spent her days in the kitchen, or else lolling on the floor playing with her daughter, never bewailing her lot till the last franc was reached. But Aristide quivered with rage in this poverty, in this narrow existence, in which he turned about like a caged beast. For him it was a period of unspeakable suffering; his pride was wounded to the quick, his unsatisfied cravings goaded him to madness. His brother succeeded in getting elected to the Corps Législatif by the arrondissement of Plassans, and he suffered all the more. He was too conscious of Eugène's superiority to be foolishly jealous: he accused him of not doing as much as he might have done for him. Time after time he was driven by want to go to him and borrow money of him. Eugène lent him the money, but reproached him roughly for his lack of spirit and willingness. After that Aristide set his back up. He swore he would never ask anybody for a sou, and he kept his word. The last week of each month Aristide ate dry bread and sighed. This apprenticeship completed Saccard's gruesome training. His lips became still more thin; he was no longer fool enough to dream of millions aloud; his emaciated person became dumb, and expressed but one desire, one fixed idea, that never left his mind. When he trotted from the Rue Saint-Jacques to the Hôtel de Ville, his worn heels sounded sharply on the pavement, and he buttoned himself up in his threadbare frock-coat as in an asylum of hatred, while his weasel's nose sniffed the air of the streets: a jagged symbol of the envious wretchedness that one sees prowling over the pavements of Paris, carrying abroad its plan of fortune and its dream of gratification.

In the early part of 1853, Aristide was appointed a surveying commissioner of roads. His salary was to be four thousand five hundred francs. This increase came in the nick of time: Angèle was in a decline, little Clotilde had lost all her colour. He kept on his scanty lodgings of two small rooms, the dining-room furnished in walnut and the bedroom in mahogany, and continued to lead a harsh existence, avoiding debt, not desiring to touch

other people's money until he was able to plunge his arms into it up to the elbows. He thus belied his instincts, scorning the few additional sous that came to him, remaining on the look-out. Angèle was perfectly happy. She bought herself some things and ate meat every day. She could no longer understand her husband's suppressed anger, nor the reason why he wore the sombre expression of a man working out the solution of a formidable problem.

Aristide followed Eugène's advice: he kept his ears and eyes open. When he went to thank his brother for his promotion, the latter observed the change that had taken place in him; he complimented him on what he called his sensible demeanour. The clerk, inwardly hardened by jealousy, had become supple and insinuating. A few months had sufficed to transform him into an admirable comedian. All his Southern ardour had been aroused; and he carried his cunning so far that his fellow-clerks at the Hôtel de Ville looked upon him as an inoffensive fellow whom his near relationship to a deputy marked out beforehand for some fat appointment. This relationship secured for him the goodwill also of his superiors. He thus enjoyed a sort of authority above his position, which enabled him to open certain doors and to explore certain receptacles without any blame being attached to his indiscretions. For two years he was seen to roam about all the passages, linger in all the rooms, leave his seat twenty times a day to go and talk to a friend, or carry an instruction, or take a stroll through the offices, endless journeys that caused his colleagues to exclaim, "That devil of a Provençal! he can't sit still: his legs are always on the move." His personal friends took him for an idler, and our worthy laughed when they accused him of having but one thought, to despoil the services of a few minutes. He never made the mistake of listening at keyholes; but he had a way of boldly opening a door and walking across a room, with a document in his hand and a preoccupied air, with a step so slow and even that he did not lose a word of the conversation. This was a masterpiece of tactics; people ended

by not interrupting themselves when this assiduous clerk passed by them, gliding through the shadows of the offices, and seemingly so wrapt up in his business. He had still one other method; he was extraordinarily obliging, he offered to help his fellow-clerks whenever they dropped into arrears with their work, and he would then study the registers and documents that passed through his hands with meditative fondness. But one of his favourite tricks was to strike up a friendship with the messengers. He went so far as to shake them by the hand. For hours together he would keep them talking between the doors, with little stifled bursts of laughter, telling them stories, drawing them out. The worthy men worshipped him, and said of him, "There's a man who isn't haughty." He was the first to be told of any scandal that might occur. And thus it came about that at the end of two years the Hôtel de Ville was an open book to him. He knew every member of the staff down to the least of the lamp-lighters, and every paper down to the laundress's bills.

The Paris of that period offered a most fascinating study to a man like Aristide Saccard. The Empire had just been proclaimed, after the famous journey in the course of which the Prince-President had succeeded in stirring up the enthusiasm of a few Bonapartist departments. The platform and the press were silent. Society, saved once again, shook hands with itself, took its ease, lay abed of a morning, now that it had a strong government to protect it and relieve it from the trouble of thinking and looking after its interests. The great preoccupation of society was to know with what amusement to kill time. In Eugène Rougon's happy phrase, Paris had sat down to dinner, and was contemplating bawdiness at dessert. Politics terrified it, like a dangerous drug. Men's enervated minds turned towards pleasure and speculation. Those who had money brought it forth from its hiding-place, and those who had none sought for forgotten treasures in every nook and cranny. And underneath the turmoil there ran a subdued quiver, a nascent sound of five-franc pieces, of women's rippling laughter, and the yet faint clatter of plate

and murmur of kisses. In the midst of the great silence, the absolute peace of the new reign of order, arose every kind of attractive rumour, of golden and voluptuous promise. It was as if one were passing in front of one of those little houses whose closely-drawn curtains reveal nothing beyond the shadows of women, whence no sound issues but that of the gold on the marble chimney-pieces. The Empire was on the point of turning Paris into the bawdy-house of Europe. The handful of adventurers who had succeeded in purloining a throne required a reign of adventures, of shady transactions, of sold consciences, of bought women, of rampant and universal drunkenness. And in the city where the blood of December was yet hardly washed away, there sprang up, timidly as yet, that mad desire for dissipation that was destined to drag down the country to the limbo of decayed and dishonoured nations.

From the very beginning Aristide Saccard felt the advent of this rising tide of speculation, whose spume was in the end to cover the whole of Paris. He watched its progress with profound attention. He found himself in the very midst of the hot rain of crown-pieces that fell thickly on to the city's roofs. In his incessant wanderings across the Hôtel de Ville, he had got wind of the vast project for the transformation of Paris, of the plan of those clearances, those new roads and improvised districts, that formidable piece of jobbery in the sale of real property, which gave rise in the four quarters of the town to the conflict of interests and the blaze of luxury unrestrained. From that time forward his activity had a purpose. It was at this period that he developed his geniality. He even fattened out a little, he ceased hurrying through the streets like an attenuated cat in search of its prey. At his office he was more chatty, more obliging than ever. His brother, whom he visited in a more or less official manner, complimented him on putting his advice so happily into practice. About the beginning of 1854 Saccard confided to him that he had several pieces of business in view, but that he would require a rather large advance.

"Look for it," said Eugène.

"You are quite right, I will look for it," he replied, with entire good humour, appearing not to perceive that his brother declined to supply him with the preliminary capital.

It was the thought of this capital that now worried him. His plan was formed, it matured day by day.

But the first few thousand francs were not to be found. His will became more and more tense; he looked at the people in the streets in a nervous and penetrating manner, as though he were seeking a lender in every wayfarer. At home Angèle continued to lead her subdued and contented existence. He awaited his opportunity; and his genial laughter became more bitter as this opportunity delayed in presenting itself.

Aristide had a sister in Paris. Sidonie Rougon had married at Plassans an attorney's clerk, and together they had set up business in the Rue Saint-Honoré as dealers in fruit from the South of France. When her brother came across her, the husband had vanished, and the business had long ago disappeared. She was living in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, in a little entresol consisting of three rooms. She also leased the shop on the ground-floor beneath her flat, a narrow and mysterious establishment in which she pretended to carry on a business in lace; and there were, as a matter of fact, in the window some odds and ends of guipure and Valenciennes, hung over gilt rods; but the inside looked like a waiting-room, with a polished wainscotting and not the least sign of goods for sale. The door and window were veiled with light curtains, which sheltered the shop from the gaze of the passers-by and completed its discreet and secluded appearance, as of the atrium to some unknown temple. It was a rare thing for a customer to be seen calling on Madame Sidonie; most frequently even the handle was removed from the door. She made it known in the neighbourhood that she waited personally upon wealthy women and offered them her lace. The convenience of the place, she used to say, was her sole reason for hiring the shop and the entresol, which communicated by means

of a staircase hidden in the wall. As a matter of fact the lace-woman was always out of doors; she was seen hurrying in and out ten times in a single day. Moreover, she did not confine herself to the lace-trade; she made use of her entresol, filling it up with a stock of things picked up nobody knew where. She had there dealt in gutta-percha goods, waterproofs, goloshes, braces, and the rest; and then followed one after the other a new oil for promoting the growth of the hair, appliances for curing deformities, a patent automatic coffee-pot, the working of which had cost her a deal of trouble. When her brother called to see her she was selling pianos; her entresol was crammed with these instruments; there were pianos even in her bedroom, a very coquettishly-furnished room that clashed with the sale-room disorder of the two others. She carried on these two businesses with perfect method; the customers who came for the goods on the entresol came in and went out through a carriage-entrance that led into the house from the Rue Papillon; you had to know the secret of the little staircase in order to be aware of the two-fold nature of the lace-woman's dealings. On the entresol she called herself Madame Touche, her husband's name, while on the door of the shop she had put only her Christian name, which caused her to be generally known as Madame Sidonie.

Madame Sidonie was thirty-five; but she dressed herself with so little care, and had so little of the woman in her manner, that one would have thought her much older. As a matter of fact she had no age. She wore an everlasting black dress, frayed at the edges, rumpled and discoloured by use, recalling an advocate's gown worn out by the wear and tear of the bar. Clad further in a black bonnet that came down to her forehead and hid her hair, and a pair of thick shoes, she trotted along the streets, carrying on her arm a little basket whose handles were mended with string. This basket, which never left her, was a world in itself. When she raised the lid there came from it samples of every sort, note-books, pocket-books, above all handfuls of stamped documents, the illegible writing on which she was peculiarly adroit at

deciphering. She combined the attributes of the bailiff and the commission-agent. She lived among protests, judgment summonses, and orders of court; when she had sold ten francs' worth of lace or pomade, she would insinuate herself into her customer's good graces and become her man of business, attending attorneys, advocates, and judges on her behalf. She would thus for weeks hawk about the particulars of a case at the bottom of her basket, taking the devil's own trouble, going from one end of Paris to the other, with a little even trot, never taking a conveyance. It would have been difficult to say what profit she made from this sort of business; she did it to begin with from an innate taste for shady traffic and a fondness for sharp practice; and then she secured a host of little advantages: dinners on every hand, franc pieces picked up here and there. But after all her most distinct gain lay in the confidences she everywhere received, putting her on the track of good strokes of business and useful windfalls. Living in the homes of others, in the business of others, she was a real walking catalogue of wants and offers. She knew where there was a daughter that had to get married at once, a family that stood in need of three thousand francs, an old gentleman willing to lend the three thousand francs, but on substantial security and at a fat rate of interest. She knew of matters more delicate than these: the sad feelings of a fair-haired lady who was not understood by her husband, and who yearned to be understood; the secret aspirations of a good mother who wished to see her little girl comfortably married; the tastes of a baron keen on little supper-parties and very young girls. And with a pale smile she hawked these wants and offers about; she would do miles on foot to interview people; she sent the baron to the good mother, induced the old gentleman to lend the three thousand francs to the distressed family, found consolation for the fair-haired lady and a not too inquiring husband for the girl that had to get married. She had big affairs on hand too, affairs that she could speak of aloud, pestering everybody who came near her: an interminable lawsuit that a noble

but ruined family had employed her to look after, and a debt contracted by England to France in the days of the Stuarts, whose figures, with the compound interest added, ran up to close upon three milliards of francs. This debt of three milliards was her hobby; she explained the case with great wealth of detail, launching out into quite an historical lecture, and a flush of enthusiasm would rise to her cheeks, usually flaccid and yellow as wax. Occasionally, between a visit to bailiff and a call on a friend, she would get rid of a coffee-pot, a waterproof, or sell a bit of lace, or place a piano on the hire system. These things gave her the least trouble. Then she would hurry back to her shop, where a customer had made an appointment to inspect a piece of Chantilly. The customer arrived and glided like a shadow into the discreetly-veiled shop. And not infrequently a gentleman would at the same time come in by the carriage-entrance in the Rue Papillon to see Madame Touche's pianos on the entresol.

If Madame Sidonie failed to make her fortune, it was because she often worked for art's sake. Loving litigation, neglecting her own business for thàt of others, she allowed herself to be fleeced by the bailiffs, though this gave her, for the rest, a rapture unknown save to the litigious. All the woman in her vanished; she became a mere man of business, a commission-agent bustling about Paris at all hours, carrying in her fabulous basket the most equivocal articles, selling everything, dreaming of milliards, and appearing in court, on behalf of a favourite client, over a contested matter of ten francs. Short, lean, and sallow, clad in the thin black dress that looked as though it had been cut out of an advocate's gown, she had shrivelled out of recognition, and to see her creeping along the houses, one would have taken her for an errand-boy dressed up as a girl. Her complexion had the piteous pallor of stamped paper. Her lips smiled an extinct smile, while her eyes seemed to swim in the whirlpool of jobs and preoccupations of every kind with which she stuffed her brains. Her ways, for the rest, were timid and discreet, with a vague reminiscence of the priest's confessional and the midwife's closet, and

she had the maternal gentleness of a nun who, having renounced all worldly affections, feels pity for the sufferings of the heart. She never spoke of her husband, nor of her childhood, her family, her personal concerns. There was only one thing that she never sold, and that was her person; not that she had any scruples, but because the idea of such a bargain could not possibly occur to her. She was as dry as an invoice, as cold as a protest, and at bottom as brutal and indifferent as a broker's man.

Saccard, fresh up from the country, was unable at first to fathom the subtle depths of Madame Sidonie's numerous trades. As he had read law for twelve months, she spoke to him one day of the three milliards with an air of seriousness that gave him a poor opinion of her intellect. She came and rummaged in the corners of the lodgings in the Rue Saint-Jacques, weighed Angèle with a glance, and did not return except when her errands brought her to the neighbourhood, and she felt a want to discuss the question of the three milliards. Angèle had nibbled at the story of the English debt. The agent mounted her hobby, and made the gold rain down for an hour. It was the crack in this quick intelligence, the sweet mad lullaby of a life wasted in squalid dealings, the magical charm with which she ensorcelled not only herself but the more credulous among her clients. Firm in her conviction moreover, she ended by speaking of the three milliards as of a personal fortune which the judges were bound sooner or later to restore to her; and this threw a wondrous halo about her poor black bonnet upon which a few faded violets curtsied on brass wires that showed the metal. Angèle opened wide her eyes. She spoke repeatedly of her sister-in-law to her husband with respectfulness, saying that perhaps Madame Sidonie would make them rich one day. Saccard shrugged his shoulders; he had been to see the shop and entresol in the Faubourg-Poissonière, and had read nothing there but approaching bankruptcy. He tried to learn Eugène's opinion of their sister; but his brother became grave, and merely replied that he never saw her, that he knew her to be a very intelligent woman, a little compromis-

ing, perhaps. Nevertheless, as Saccard was returning to the Rue Penthièvre some time afterwards, he thought he saw Mme. Sidonie's black dress leave his brother's and glide rapidly along the houses. He ran after it, but was unable again to catch sight of the black dress. The she-agent had one of those spare figures that get lost in a crowd. He stood pondering, and from this moment he began to study his sister more attentively. It was not long before he grasped the immensity of the toil performed by this pale, nebulous, little creature, whose whole face seemed to melt away into shapelessness. He respected her. She was a true Rougon. He recognized this hunger for money, this longing for intrigue, which was the characteristic of the family; only in her case, thanks to the surroundings amid which she had matured, thanks to that Paris where each morning she had to seek to make her evening black bread, the common temperament had deviated from its course, producing this extraordinary hermaphrodism of the woman grown sexless, man of business and procuress in one.

When Saccard, after having drawn up his schemes, set out in search of his preliminary capital, his thoughts naturally turned towards his sister. She shook her head, and sighed, talked of her three milliards. But the clerk would not humour her madness, he pulled her up roughly each time she got back to the Stuart debt; this myth seemed to him to disgrace so practical an intellect. Mme. Sidonie, who quietly accepted the most cutting satire without allowing her convictions to be shaken, next explained to him with great lucidity that he would not raise a sou, having no security to offer. This conversation took place in front of the Bourse, where she was about to speculate with her savings. One was certain to find her at about three o'clock leaning against the rail, on the left, at the post-office side; it was there that she gave audience to individuals as sinister and shady as herself. As her brother was on the point of leaving her, she murmured regretfully, "Ah! if only you were unmarried! . . ." This reservation, of which he scrupled to enquire the exact and complete meaning, made Saccard singularly reflective.

Months passed, war was declared in the Crimea. Paris, unmoved by a war so distant, threw itself with growing ardour into speculation and the commerce of harlots. Saccard stood by, gnawing his fists, as he watched this increasing mania which he had foreseen. The hammers beating the gold on the anvils of this gigantic forge gave him shocks of fury and impatience. So tense were his intellect and his will that he lived in a dream, like a sleep-walker stepping along the edge of a roof under the influence of a fixed idea. He was surprised, therefore, and irritated, one evening to find Angèle ill in bed. His home life, regular as clock-work, was upset, and this exasperated him like a thought-out spitefulness of Fate. Poor Angèle complained gently; she had caught a chill. When the doctor came, he appeared very anxious; he told the husband on the landing that his wife had inflammation of the lungs, and that he could not answer for her recovery. From that moment the clerk nursed the sick woman without any feeling of anger; he no longer went to his office, he stayed by her side, watching her with an indescribable look on his face, whenever she lay asleep, flushed and panting with fever. Mme. Sidonie found time, notwithstanding the overwhelming nature of her work, to call every evening and make decoctions which she maintained to be sovereign in their effects. To all her other professions she added that of a heaven-born sick-nurse, taking an interest in sufferings, in remedies, in the broken-hearted conversations that linger round death-beds. She seemed to have taken a tender liking for Angèle; she had a way of loving women, with a thousand caresses, doubtless because of the pleasure they gave to men; she treated them with the delicate attention that merchants bestow upon the more precious of their wares, calling them " Pretty one, sweetheart," cooing to them, and behaving with the transports of a lover in the presence of his mistress. And though Angèle was one of those out of whom there was nothing to be made, yet she cajoled her like the others, on principle. When the young wife took to her bed, Mme. Sidonie's effusions became tearful, she filled the silent

chamber with her devotedness. Her brother watched her moving about, his lips tight, as though crushed with silent grief.

The illness grew worse. One evening the doctor informed them that the patient would not live through the night. Mme. Sidonie had come early, preoccupied, watching Aristide and Angèle with her watery eyes, illumined by momentary flashes of fire. When the doctor was gone, she lowered the lamp, and there was a great hush. Death entered slowly into the hot, moist room, where the uneven breathing of the dying woman sounded like the spasmodic ticking of a clock that is running down. Mme. Sidonie desisted from her potions, letting the illness take its course. She sat down before the fire-place, near her brother, who was poking the fire with a feverish hand, throwing involuntary glances the while towards the bed. Then, as though unnerved by the closeness of the atmosphere, he withdrew into the adjoining room; little Clotilde, who had been shut in there, was playing with her doll, very quietly, on a fragment of carpet. His daughter was smiling to him, when Mme. Sidonie, gliding up behind, drew him to a corner, speaking low. The door remained standing open. They could hear the faint rattle in Angèle's throat.

"Your poor wife . . . ." the agent sobbed out. "I fear it will soon be over. You heard what the doctor said?"

Saccard made no answer, but dismally bowed his head.

"She was a good soul," continued the other, speaking as though Angèle were already dead. "You may find many richer women, and more fashionable women; but you will never find another heart like hers."

Seeing her stop, wipe her eyes, and seek an excuse for changing the subject, Saccard asked her, simply:

"Have you anything to tell me?"

"Yes, I have been working for you, in the matter you know of, and I think I have found . . . . But at such a moment. . . . Believe me, my heart is broken."

She went on wiping her eyes. Saccard let her have her way

quietly, without opening his mouth. Then she came to the point.

" There is a young girl whom her people want to see married at once. The sweet child has had a misfortune. She has an aunt who would be prepared to make a sacrifice . . . ."

She interrupted herself, she had never ceased lamenting, weeping out her words, as though still bewailing poor Angèle. Her object was to make her brother lose patience, and to compel him to question her, so that she should not have all the responsibility of the offer which she had come to make to him. And in fact the clerk was seized with an unreasoning irritation.

" Come, out with it! " he said. " Why do they want to marry this girl? "

" She had just left school," continued the agent, in a dismal voice, " and a man seduced her, in the country, where she was staying with the relations of one of her school-fellows. The father has just discovered her condition. He wanted to kill her. The aunt, in order to save the dear child, became her accomplice, and between the two of them they made up a story and told the father that the guilty one was a man of honour whose one desire was to atone for his momentary offence."

" In that case," said Saccard, in a tone of surprise and seeming annoyance, " the man in the country is going to marry the girl? "

" No, he can't, he is a married man."

A pause ensued. The rattle in Angèle's throat sounded more painfully in the quivering atmosphere. Little Clotilde had ceased playing; she looked up at Madame Sidonie and her father, with her great pensive child-eyes, as though she had understood their conversation. Saccard began to put brief questions:

" How old is this young girl? "

" Nineteen."

" How long has she been in the family way? "

" Three months. It is sure to be a miscarriage."

" And is the family rich and respectable? "

"They belong to the old-fashioned middle-class. The father used to be a magistrate. They are very well-to-do."

"What would this sacrifice of the aunt's amount to?"

"A hundred thousand francs."

There was another pause. Mme. Sidonie had ceased snivelling; she was doing business now, her voice assumed the metallic tones of a second-hand clothes-woman haggling over a bargain. Her brother took a sidelong glance at her, and added, with some hesitation:

"And you, what do you want out of it?"

"We shall see later on," she replied. "You can do something for me in your turn."

She waited a few seconds; and as he did not speak, she asked him straight out:

"Well, have you made up your mind? Those poor women are at their wit's end. They want to prevent an outburst. They have promised to give up the culprit's name to the father to-morrow . . . . If you accept, I will send them your card by a messenger."

Saccard seemed to wake from a dream; he started, and turned timorously towards the next room, where he thought he had heard a slight noise.

"But I can't," he said, with anguish in his voice, "you well know I can't . . . ."

Mme. Sidonie looked at him fixedly, with a cold and scornful gaze. All his Rougon blood, all his eager covetousness, rushed to his throat. He took a visiting-card from his pocket-book, and gave it to his sister, who put it in an envelope, after carefully scratching out the address. Then she went down the stairs. It was barely nine o'clock.

Left alone, Saccard went to the window and pressed his forehead against the icy panes. He forgot himself so far as to beat a tattoo with his fingers on the glass. But the night was so black, the outer darkness hung in such strange masses, that he experienced a feeling of uneasiness, and returned to the room where

Angèle lay dying. He had forgotten her; he received a terrible shock on finding her half raised up against her pillows; her eyes stood wide open, a flush of life seemed to have returned to her cheeks and lips. Little Clotilde, still nursing her doll, was seated on the edge of the bed; as soon as her father's back was turned, she had quickly slipped back into that room from which she had been removed, and to which all her happy childish curiosity attracted her. Saccard, his head full of his sister's recital, saw his dream dashed to the ground. A hideous thought must have shone from his eyes. Angèle, seized with terror, tried to throw herself back into bed, against the wall; but death came, this awakening in agony was the last flicker of the expiring lamp. The dying woman was unable to move; she sank back, keeping her eyes fixed wide open upon her husband, as though to watch his every movement. Saccard, who had dreaded a resurrection, a devil's device of destiny to keep him in penury, was reassured on seeing that the wretched woman had not an hour to live. He now felt nothing but intolerable uneasiness. Angèle's eyes told him that she had overheard her husband's conversation with Mme. Sidonie, and that she feared he would strangle her if she did not die sufficiently quickly. And her eyes still retained the terrified amazement of a sweet and inoffensive nature that learns at the last moment the infamy of this world, and shudders at the thought of the long years passed side by side with a miscreant. Little by little her look softened; she was no longer afraid, she seemed to find an excuse for the wretch as she thought of the desperate struggle he had so long maintained against Fate. Saccard, followed by the dying woman's gaze, in which he read so deep a reproach, leant against the furniture for support, sought the dark corners of the room. Then, faltering, he made as though to drive away the nightmare that was maddening him, and stepped forward into the light of the lamp. But Angèle signed to him not to speak. And she continued to look at him with her look of terror-stricken anguish, to which was now added a promise of forgiveness. Then he stooped to take Clo-

tilde in his arms and carry her into the other room. She forbade him this, too, with a movement of her lips. She insisted that he should stay there. She expired gently, without removing her gaze from him, and, as her sight grew dimmed, that gaze became more and more gentle. At the last breath she forgave him. She died as she had lived, colourlessly, effacing herself in death as she had effaced herself during life. Saccard stood shivering before those dead eyes, still open, which continued to follow him in their immobility. Little Clotilde nursed her doll on the edge of the sheets, gently, so as not to awaken her mother.

When Mme. Sidonie returned, it was all over. With the trick of the fingers of a woman used to this operation, she closed Angèle's eyes, to Saccard's intense relief. Then, after putting the little one to bed, she deftly arranged the mortuary chamber. When she had lit two candles on the chest of drawers, and carefully drawn the sheet to meet the chin of the corpse, she threw a glance of satisfaction around her, and stretched herself out in an easy-chair, where she slumbered till daybreak. Saccard spent the night in the next room, writing out the announcements of the death. He interrupted himself from time to time, forgetting himself, and jotting down columns of figures on scraps of paper.

On the evening of the funeral, Mme. Sidonie carried off Saccard to her entresol. There great resolutions were come to. The clerk decided to send little Clotilde to one of his brothers, Pascal Rougon, a doctor who led a solitary life at Plassans, sunk in research, and who had frequently offered to take his niece to enliven his silent scientific home. Mme. Sidonie next gave him to understand that he must no longer remain in the Rue Saint-Jacques. She would take an elegant set of furnished rooms for him for a month, somewhere round about the Hôtel de Ville; she would try and find some rooms in a private house, so that the furniture might seem to belong to him. As to the chattels in the Rue Saint-Jacques, they would be sold, so as to efface the last traces of the past. He could use the money in buying himself a wedding outfit and some decent clothes. Three days later Clo-

tilde was handed over to an old lady who just happened to be going to the South. And Aristide Saccard, exultant and rosy-cheeked, fattened already in three days by the first smiles of Fortune, occupied in the Marais, in the Rue Payenne, in a severe and respectable house, a smart five-roomed flat, which he perambulated in embroidered slippers. They were the rooms of a young abbé, who had left suddenly for Italy and had sent instructions to his housekeeper to let them. This woman was a friend of Mme. Sidonie, who affected the cloth a little; she loved priests with the love she bestowed on women, instinctively, establishing, possibly, a certain subtle relationship between cassocks and silk skirts. From that time Saccard was prepared; he had thought out his part with exquisite art; he awaited without flinching the difficulties and niceties of the situation he had accepted.

On the hideous night of Angèle's last agony, Madame Sidonie had faithfully related, in few words, the case of the Béraud family. Its head, M. Béraud du Châtel, a tall old man of sixty, was the last representative of an ancient middle-class family, whose pedigree went further back than that of certain noble houses. One of his ancestors was the friend of Étienne Marcel. In '93 his father had died on the scaffold, after welcoming the Republic with all the enthusiasm of a burgess of Paris in whose veins flowed the revolutionary blood of the city. He himself was a Republican of ancient Sparta, whose dream was a reign of universal justice and sound liberty. Grown old in the magistracy, where he had contracted a professional inflexibility and severity, he had resigned his chairmanship in 1851, at the time of the Coup d'État, after refusing to take part in one of those mixed commissions which tended to dishonour French justice. Since that time he had been living alone in retirement in his house on the Île Saint-Louis, situated at the extremity of the island, almost facing the Hôtel Lambert. His wife had died young. Some secret tragedy, whose wound remained unhealed, added still further to the gloom of the magistrate's countenance. He was

already the father of an eight-year-old daughter, Renée, when his wife expired in giving birth to a second. The latter, who was called Christine, was taken charge of by a sister of M. Béraud du Châtel, the wife of Aubertot the notary. Renée went to a convent. Madame Aubertot, who had no children, took a maternal fondness for Christine, whom she brought up by her side. On her husband's death, she brought back the little one to its father, and continued to live with the silent old man and the smiling, fair-haired child. Renée was forgotten at her school. During the holidays she filled the house with such an uproar that her aunt heaved a great sigh of relief when she had at last escorted her back to the ladies of the Visitation, where she had been a boarder since her eighth year. She did not leave the convent until she was nineteen, and went straight to spend the fine season at the home of her friend Adeline, whose parents owned a beautiful estate in the Nivernais. When she returned in October, her Aunt Elisabeth was surprised to find her serious and profoundly melancholy. One evening she discovered her stifling her sobs in her pillow, writhing on her bed in a paroxysm of uncontrollable grief. In the unconstraint of her despair the girl told her a heart-rending story: how a man of forty, rich, married—his wife, a young and charming woman, was there—had violated her in a field, without her daring or knowing how to defend herself. This confession terrified Aunt Elisabeth; she accused herself, as though she felt herself to be to blame; her preference for Christine made her deeply unhappy; she thought that, had she kept Renée also beside her, the poor child would not have succumbed. Henceforth, in order to drive away this exquisite remorse, which was rendered still more acute by the tenderness of her nature, she sustained the erring one; she bore the brunt of the anger of the father, to whom they both revealed the horrible truth by the very excess of their precautions; she invented, in the bewilderment of her solicitude, this strange project of matrimony, which to her idea would settle the whole affair, appease the father,

and restore Renée to the world of honest women, and she refused to perceive its shameful side or foresee its disastrous consequences.

Nobody ever knew how Madame Sidonie had got wind of this good bit of business. The honour of the Bérauds had been dragged about in her basket among the protested bills of every strumpet in Paris. Once she knew the story, she almost forced her brother, whose wife lay dying, upon them. Aunt Elisabeth ended by believing that she was under an obligation to this gentle, humble lady, who was devoting herself to the unhappy Renée to the degree of finding a husband for her in her own family. The first interview between the aunt and Saccard took place on the entresol in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonière. The clerk, who had arrived by the carriage-entrance in the Rue Papillon, realized, when he saw Madame Aubertot coming through the shop and the little stair-case, the ingenious arrangement of the two entrances. He was full of tact and propriety. He treated the marriage as a matter of business, but in the fashion of a man of the world settling his debts of honour. Aunt Elisabeth was far less at ease than he; she stammered, she had not the courage to mention the hundred thousand francs she had promised him.

It was he who first broached the question of money, with the manner of a solicitor discussing a client's case. According to him a hundred thousand francs was a ridiculous sum for the husband of Mademoiselle Renée to bring into settlement. He laid a little stress on the "mademoiselle." M. Béraud du Châtel would still more despise a poor son-in-law: he would accuse him of having seduced his daughter for the sake of her fortune; perhaps it might even occur to him to make some private enquiries. Startled and dismayed by Saccard's calm and polite phrases, Madame Aubertot lost her head and consented to double the amount when he declared that he would never dare to propose for Renée with less than two hundred thousand francs in his pocket; he did not wish to be taken for a contemptible fortune-hunter. The

good lady departed quite confused, not knowing what to think of a man capable of so much indignation, and yet willing to accept a bargain of such a nature.

This first interview was followed by an official visit which Aunt Elisabeth paid Saccard at his rooms in the Rue Payenne. This time she came in the name of M. Béraud. The ex-magistrate had refused to see "that man," as he called his daughter's seducer, so long as he was not married to Renée, to whom furthermore he had also forbidden his house. Madame Aubertot had full powers of treaty. She seemed pleased with the clerk's luxurious surroundings; she had feared that the brother of that Madame Sidonie, with her draggled skirts, might be a disreputable-looking person. He received her swathed in a delightful dressing-gown. It was at the time when the adventurers of the 2 Décembre, after paying their debts, flung their worn boots and frayed coats into the sewers, shaved their eight days' beards, and became respectable men. Saccard was at last to join the band; he cleaned his nails and washed exclusively with powders and perfumes of inestimable value. He made himself gallant; he changed his tactics and shewed himself wonderfully disinterested. When the old lady began to talk of the contract, he made a gesture as though to say what did he mind. For a week past he had been studying the Code, pondering this serious question on which would depend his future liberty of action as a sharp buisness practitioner.

"I beg you," he said, "let us hear no more of this disagreeable question of money . . . . My opinion is that Mademoiselle Renée should remain mistress of her fortune and I master of mine. The notary will put that right."

Aunt Elisabeth approved of this manner of looking at things; she trembled lest this fellow, whose iron grip she could vaguely perceive, should wish to thrust his fingers into her niece's dowry. She next entered into the matter of this dowry.

"My brother's fortune," she said, "consists mainly of houses and landed property. He is not the man to punish his daughter

by reducing the share he intended for her. He will give her an estate in the Sologne valued at three hundred thousand francs, in addition to a house in Paris which is worth about two hundred thousand francs."

Saccard was dazzled; he had expected no such amount; he turned half away so as to hide the rush of blood that came to his face.

"That will make five hundred thousand francs," continued the aunt; "but I am bound to add that the Sologne property yields only two per cent."

He smiled, repeating his disinterested gesture, implying that that could not concern him, as he declined to interfere with his wife's property. He sat in his arm-chair in an adorable attitude of indifference, absent-minded, balancing his slipper on his foot, seeming to listen from sheer politeness. Mme. Aubertot, with her simple-minded good-nature, spoke with difficulty, picking her words so as not to wound him. She continued:

"And lastly, I want to make Renée a present myself. I have no children, my property will some day revert to my nieces, and I am not going to close my hands now because one of them is in trouble. Both their wedding-presents were ready for them. Renée's consists of some extensive plots of land up Charonne way, which I can safely value at two hundred thousand francs. Only . . . ."

At the word land Saccard started slightly. In spite of his assumed indifference he was listening intently. Aunt Elisabeth became confused, apparently at a loss for the right expression, and continued, blushing:

"Only, I wish the ownership of this land to be settled on Renée's first child. You understand my reason. I do not wish this child ever to be of any expense to you. In the event of its dying, Renée would become the sole owner."

He made no sign, but his knit brows revealed great inward preoccupation. The mention of the land at Charonne had aroused within him a world of ideas. Mme. Aubertot feared she had

offended him by speaking of Renée's child, and she remained abashed, not knowing how to follow up the conversation.

"You have not told me in what street the house worth two hundred thousand francs stands," he said, resuming his smiling, genial air.

"In the Rue de la Pépinière," she replied; "almost at the corner of the Rue d'Astorg."

This simple sentence produced a decided effect on him. He could no longer conceal his delight; he drew up his chair, and with his Provençal volubility, in coaxing tones:

"Dear lady," he said, "have we not said enough, need we continue to talk of this confounded money? . . . . See here, I want to tell you my story quite frankly, for I should be most unhappy if I failed to deserve your regard. I lost my wife recently, I have two children left on my hands, I am a sensible and practical man. In marrying your niece I am doing good all round. If you retain any prejudice against me, you will lose it later on when I have dried everyone's tears and made the fortune of all my family. Success is a golden flame that purifies everything. I want M. Béraud himself to shake me by the hand and thank me . . . ."

He lost himself. He talked on for a long while in the same bantering strain, whose cynicism from time to time shone through his genial air. He dragged in his brother, the Deputy, his father the receiver of taxes at Plassans. He ended by making a conquest of Aunt Elisabeth who, with involuntary joy, saw the tragedy under which she had been suffering for the past month ending, under this clever man's fingers, in a comedy that was almost hilarious. It was arranged that they should go to the notary the next day.

So soon as Madame Aubertot had gone, Saccard went to the Hôtel de Ville, and spent the day in turning over certain documents that he knew of. At the notary's he raised a difficulty, he said that as Renée's dowry consisted entirely of landed property,

he feared it would give her a deal of worry, and that he thought it would be as well to sell the house in the Rue de la Pépinière in order to secure her an investment in the funds. Mme. Aubertot proposed to refer the matter to M. Béraud du Châtel, who continued to keep his room. Saccard went out again till the evening. He went to the Rue de la Pépinière, he walked about Paris with the preoccupied air of a general on the eve of a decisive battle. The next day Mme. Aubertot declared that M. Béraud du Châtel left the whole matter in her hands. The contract was drawn up on the lines already discussed. Saccard brought in two hundred thousand francs, Renée's dowry was the Sologne property and the house in the Rue de la Pépinière, which she agreed to sell; and further, in the case of the death of her first child, she was to be the sole owner of the land at Charonne given her by her aunt. The contract was in accordance with the system of separate estates by which the husband and wife retain the entire management of their respective fortunes. Aunt Elisabeth followed the notary attentively, and seemed contented with this system, whose provisions apparently assured her niece's independence by placing her fortune beyond the reach of any attempts. Saccard smiled vaguely as he saw the good lady nodding her approval of each clause. The marriage was fixed to take place at the earliest possible date.

When all was settled, Saccard paid a ceremonial visit to his brother Eugène to announce his marriage with Mlle. Renée Béraud du Châtel. This master-stroke took the deputy by surprise. As he made no attempt to conceal his astonishment, the clerk said:

"You told me to look, and I looked until I found."

Eugène, bewildered at first, began to get a glimpse of the truth. And in a charming tone he said:

"Come, you're a clever fellow . . . . I suppose you have come to ask me to be your witness. You may rely on me . . . . If necessary, I will bring the whole of the Right of the Corps

Législatif to your wedding; that would launch you nicely. . . ."

Then, as he had opened the door, he lowered his voice to add:

"I say . . . . I don't want to compromise myself too much just now, we have a very tough bill to pass . . . . The lady is not very far gone, I hope? "

Saccard gave him such a savage look that Eugène said to himself, as he shut the door:

"That's a joke that would cost me dear if I were not a Rougon."

The marriage was solemnised in the Church of Saint-Louis-en-l'Île. Saccard and Renée did not meet till the eve of that great day. The introduction took place early in the evening, in a low reception-room at the Hôtel Béraud. They examined each other curiously. Renée, since her marriage had been arranged, had regained her light-headedness, her madcap ways. She was a tall girl of exquisite and tempestuous beauty, that had grown up at random through her school-girl caprices. She thought Saccard small and ugly, but ugly in a restless and intelligent way that she did not dislike; and moreover, he was perfect in manner and deportment. As for him, he made a little grimace at the first sight of her; she doubtless struck him as too tall, taller than he was. They exchanged a few words, free from embarrassment. Had the father been present, he might readily have believed that they had long known each other, and that they had a common fault in their past lives. Aunt Elisabeth, who was present at the interview, blushed in their stead.

On the day after the wedding, which the presence of Eugène Rougon, whom a recent speech had brought to the forefront, magnified into an event in the Île Saint-Louis, the newly-married couple were at length admitted to the presence of Monsieur Béraud du Châtel. Renée shed tears on finding her father aged, graver, and sadder. Saccard, whom up to that point nothing had put out of countenance, was frozen by the chill and gloom of the room, by the sombre austerity of the tall old man, whose piercing

eye seemed to penetrate to the depths of his conscience. The ex-magistrate kissed his daughter slowly on the forehead, as though to tell her that he forgave her, and turning to his son-in-law:

"Monsieur," he said, simply, "we have suffered greatly, I trust you will give us reason to forget the wrong you have done us."

He held out his hand. But Saccard remained timorous. He thought how, if M. Béraud du Châtel had not given way under the tragic sorrow of Renée's shame, he might with a glance, with a gesture, have annulled Madame Sidonie's manuœvres. The latter, after bringing her brother and Aunt Elisabeth together, had prudently effaced herself. She had not even come to the wedding. Saccard adopted an attitude of great frankness towards the old man, having read in his face a look of surprise at finding his daughter's seducer ugly, little, and forty years of age. The newly-married couple were compelled to spend the first nights at the Hôtel Béraud. Christine had been sent away two months since, so that this child of fourteen might have no suspicion of the drama that was being enacted in this house, peaceful and serene as a convent. When she returned home, she stood aghast before her sister's husband, whom she too thought old and ugly. Renée alone seemed to take but little notice of her husband's age or his mean aspect. She treated him without contempt as without affection, with absolute tranquillity, through which was visible an occasional glimmer of ironical disdain. Saccard strutted about, made himself at home, and really succeeded, by his frankness and vivacity, in gradually winning everybody's good will. When they took their departure, in order to instal themselves in an imposing flat in a new house in the Rue de Rivoli, M. Béraud du Châtel had lost his look of astonishment, and Christine had taken to playing with her brother-in-law as with a school-fellow. Renée's pregnancy was at that time four months advanced; her husband was on the point of sending her to the country, proposing afterwards to lie as to the child's age, when, as Madame Sidonie had foretold, she had a miscarriage. She had so tightly

laced herself to dissimulate her condition, which was moreover concealed under the fulness of her skirts, that she was compelled to keep her bed for some weeks. He was enchanted with the adventure; Fortune was at last on his side; he had made a golden bargain: a splendid dowry, a wife of a beauty that should be worth a decoration to him within six months, and not the least encumbrance. He had received two hundred thousand francs to give his name to a fœtus which its mother would not even look at. From that moment his thoughts began to turn affectionately towards the Charonne property. But for the time being he devoted all his attention to a speculation which was to be the basis of his fortune.

Notwithstanding the high standing of his wife's family, he did not immediately resign his post as a surveyor of roads. He talked of work that had to be finished, of an occupation that had to be sought for. As a matter of fact he wished to remain till the end on the battle-field upon which he was venturing his first stake. He felt at home, he was able to cheat more at his ease.

His plan of fortune was simple and practical. Now that he had more money than he had ever hoped for in hand to begin his operations, he reckoned on putting his designs into execution on a large scale. He had all Paris at his fingers' ends; he knew that the shower of gold which was beating down upon the walls would fall more heavily every day. Clever people had but to open their pockets. He had enlisted himself among the clever ones by reading the future in the offices of the Hôtel de Ville. His duties had taught him what may be stolen in the buying and selling of houses and ground. He was well up in every classical swindle: he knew how you sell for a million what has cost you five hundred thousand francs; how you acquire the right of rifling the treasury of the State, which smiles and closes its eyes; how, when throwing a boulevard across the belly of an old quarter, you juggle with six-storied houses amidst the unanimous applause of your dupes. And in these still clouded days, when the canker of speculation

was but at its period of incubation, what made a formidable gambler of him was that he saw further than his chiefs themselves into the stone-and-plaster future reserved for Paris. He had ferreted to such an extent, collected so many clues, that he could have prophesied the appearance the new neighbourhoods would offer in 1870. Sometimes, in the street, he would look at certain houses in a curious way, as though they were acquaintances whose destiny, known to him alone, deeply affected him.

Two months before Angèle's death, he had taken her, on a Sunday, to the Buttes Montmartre. The poor woman loved dining at a restaurant; she was delighted whenever, after a long walk, he sat her down at a table in some hostelry on the outskirts of the town. On this particular day they dined at the top of the hill, in a restaurant whose windows looked out over Paris, over that sea of houses with blue roofs, like surging billows that filled the vast horizon. Their table was placed at one of the windows. The sight of the roofs of Paris enlivened Saccard. At dessert he called for a bottle of Burgundy. He smiled into space, he was unusually gallant. And his looks always returned amorously to that living, seething ocean, from which issued the deep voice of the crowd. It was autumn; beneath the great pale sky the city lay listless in a soft and tender gray, pierced here and there with dark patches of foliage that resembled the broad leaves of water-lilies floating on a lake; the sun was setting behind a red cloud, and, while the background was filled with a light haze, a shower of gold dust, of golden dew, fell on the right bank of the river, in the neighbourhood of the Madeleine and the Tuileries. It was like an enchanted corner in a city of the "Arabian Nights," with emerald trees, sapphire roofs, ruby weathercocks. There came a moment when a ray of sunlight, gliding from between two clouds, was so resplendent that the houses seemed to flare up and melt like an ingot of gold in a crucible.

"Oh! look," said Saccard, with a laugh like a child's, "it is raining twenty-franc pieces in Paris!"

Angèle joined in the laughter, saying that that sort of pieces was not easy to pick up. But her husband had stood up, and leaning on the handrail of the window:

"That is the Vendôme Column, is it not, glittering over there? . . . . There, more to the right, you can see the Madeleine . . . . A fine district, where there is much to be done. . . . . Ah! now it is all going to blaze up! Do you see? . . . . You would think the whole neighbourhood was boiling in a chemist's retort."

His voice became eager and agitated. The comparison he had hit upon seemed to strike him greatly. He had been drinking Burgundy, he forgot himself; stretching out his arm to show Paris to Angèle, who was leaning by his side, he went on:

"Yes, yes, I said so, more than one district will be melted down, and gold will stick to the fingers of those who heat and stir the mortar. That great noodle of a Paris! see how big it is, and how quietly it goes to sleep! What fools, these large towns! It has no suspicion of the army of picks that will fall upon it one of these fine mornings, and certain houses in the Rue d'Anjou would not shine so brightly in the sunset, if they knew that they have only three or four years to live."

Angèle thought her husband was joking. He sometimes showed a predilection for colossal and disquieting pleasantries. She laughed, but with a vague terror, at the sight of this little man standing erect over the recumbent giant at his feet, and shaking his fist at it while ironically pursing his lips.

"They have begun already," he continued. "But it is nothing much yet. Look down there, over by the Halles, they have cut Paris into four . . . ."

And with his hand spread out, open and sharp-edged as a cutlass, he made the movement of separating the city into four parts.

"You mean the Rue de Rivoli and the new boulevard they are building? " asked his wife.

"Yes, the great transept of Paris, as they call it. They're

clearing away the buildings round the Louvre and the Hôtel de Ville. That's mere child's play! It serves to awaken the public's appetite . . . . When the first network is finished the fun will begin. The second network will pierce the city in every direction so as to connect the suburbs with the first. The remains will disappear in clouds of plaster . . . . Look, just follow my hand. From the Boulevard du Temple to the Barrière du Trône, that's one cutting; then on this side another, from the Madeleine to the Plaine Monceau; and a third cutting this way, another that way, a cutting there, one further on, cuttings on every side, Paris slashed with sabre cuts, its veins opened, giving sustenance to a hundred thousand navvies and bricklayers, traversed by splendid military roads which will bring the forts into the very heart of the old quarters of the town."

Night was falling. His dry, nervous hand kept cutting through space. Angèle shivered slightly before this living knife, those iron fingers mercilessly slicing up the boundless mass of dusky roofs. During the last moment the haze of the horizon had been descending slowly from the heights, and she fancied she could hear, beneath the gloom that was gathering in the hollows, a distant cracking, as though her husband's hand had really made the cuttings he spoke of, splitting up Paris from one end to the other, severing beams, crushing masonry, leaving behind it long and hideous wounds of crumbling walls. The smallness of this hand, hovering pitilessly over a gigantic prey, ended by becoming disquieting; and as, without effort, it tore asunder the entrails of the enormous city, it seemed to assume a strange reflex of steel in the blue of the twilight.

"There is to be a third network," continued Saccard after a pause, as though talking to himself; "that one is too far off yet, I do not see it so distinctly. I have heard only a little about it . . . . But there will be a sheer orgy, a bacchanal of millions, Paris drunk and overwhelmed!"

He lapsed into silence, his eyes ardently fixed upon the town, over which the shadows were falling more and more deeply. He

was apparently interrogating that too-distant future which escaped him. Then night fell, the city became confused, one heard it breathing heavily, like the sea when the eye no longer distinguishes anything but the pale crest of the billows. Here and there a wall still stood out white; and the yellow flames of the gas-jets pierced the darkness one by one, like stars lighting up in the blackness of a stormy sky.

Angèle shook off her feeling of uneasiness, and took up the jest that her husband had made at dessert.

"Well," she said, with a smile, "there has been a fine shower of those twenty-franc pieces! The people of Paris are counting them now. Look at the great heaps they are laying out at our feet!"

She pointed to the streets that run down opposite the Buttes Montmartre, whose gas-lights seemed to be heaping up their specks of gold in two rows.

"And over there," she cried, pointing with her finger to a swarm of stars, "that must be the treasury."

The jest made Saccard laugh. They stayed a few moments longer at the window, enchanted with this torrent of "twenty-franc pieces," which had ended by setting light to the whole of Paris. On the road home from Montmartre the surveyor of roads no doubt repented of having spoken so freely. He put it down to the Burgundy, and begged his wife not to repeat the "nonsense" he had been talking; he wanted, he said, to be a serious person. For a long time past Saccard had been studying these three arteries of streets and boulevards, of which he had so far forgotten himself as to lay bare the plan to Angèle with tolerable correctness. When the latter died, he was not sorry to think that she bore with her into the grave his chatter on the occasion of the Montmartre expedition. There lay his fortune, in those famous gaps which his hand had cut out in the heart of Paris, and he had made up his mind to communicate his idea to nobody, well knowing that on the day of the spoil there would be crows enough hovering over the disembowelled city. His first inten-

tion had been to get hold cheaply of some building which he would know beforehand to be condemned to speedy demolition, and to realize a big profit by obtaining substantial compensation. He might, perhaps, have gone so far as to make the attempt without a sou, buying the house on credit, and only receiving the difference, as on the Bourse, when his second marriage, bringing him in a premium of two hundred thousand francs, fixed and enlarged his design. Now, his calculations were made; he would buy the house in the Rue de la Pépinière from his wife through an intermediary, without allowing his own name to appear, and treble his outlay, thanks to the knowledge he had picked up in the corridors of the Hôtel de Ville, and to his pleasant relations with certain eminent persons of influence. The reason he started when Aunt Elisabeth told him where the house was situated was because this was right in the centre of the design for a thoroughfare which had not yet been talked of outside the private office of the Préfet of the Seine. This thoroughfare would be swallowed up entirely by the Boulevard Malesherbes. It was an old scheme of Napoleon I, which they were now thinking of carrying out, "in order," said the serious people, "to give a normal outlet to districts lost behind a labyrinth of narrow streets on the slope of the hills that mark the outskirts of Paris." This official phrase did not, of course, admit the interest the Empire possessed in making the money dance, in organising those redoubtable excavations and building operations which gave the labouring classes no time to think. Saccard had ventured one day to consult, in the préfet's room, that famous plan of Paris on which "an august hand" had traced in red ink the principal thoroughfares of the second network. Those blood-red pen-strokes cut even deeper gashes into Paris than did Saccard's hand. The Boulevard Malesherbes, which pulled down some magnificent houses in the Rue d'Anjou and the Rue de la Ville-l'Évêque, and necessitated a large number of levelling works, was to be one of the first laid out. When Saccard went to look over the building in the Rue de la Pépinière,

he thought of that autumn evening, of that dinner he had taken with Angèle on the Buttes Montmartre, during which, at sunset, so thick a shower of louis d'or had fallen on the Madeleine quarter. He smiled; he pictured to himself the radiant cloud as bursting over his own court-yard, and that he was on his way to pick up the twenty-franc pieces.

While Renée, luxuriously installed in the flat in the Rue de Rivoli, in the centre of that new Paris, one of whose queens she was destined to become, thought out her future dresses and took her first steps in the life of a woman of fashion, her husband was devoutly maturing his first great scheme. He began by purchasing from her the house in the Rue de la Pépinière, thanks to the intermediary of a certain Larsonneau, whom he had come across ferreting like himself in the offices of the Hôtel de Ville. Larsonneau, however, had been stupid enough to allow himself to be caught one day when he was prying into the préfet's private drawers. He had set up as an agent at the end of a dark, damp court at the foot of the Rue Saint-Jacques. His pride, his greed suffered torments there. He found himself in the same position as Saccard before his marriage; he too, he would say, had invented "a five-franc piece machine"; only he lacked the necessary funds to turn his invention to profit. A hint was sufficient to enable him to come to an understanding with his former colleague; and he did his part of the work so well that he obtained the house for one hundred and fifty thousand francs. Renée was already, before many months had elapsed, in great need of money. The husband did not appear in the matter except to authorize his wife to sell. When the sale was effected, she asked him to invest a hundred thousand francs for her, handing it to him with full confidence, so as no doubt to touch him and make him close his eyes to the fact that she was keeping fifty thousand francs back. He smiled knowingly; he had reckoned on her squandering her money; those fifty thousand francs, which were about to disappear in jewellery and lace, were calculated to bring him in cent. per cent. He carried his honesty so far, so

well satisfied was he with his first transaction, as really to invest Renée's hundred thousand francs and hand her the share certificates. His wife had no power to transfer them; he was certain of being able to lay his hand on them if ever he happened to want them.

"My dear, this will do for your dress," he said gallantly.

When he had obtained possession of the house, he had the ingenuity to have it sold over again, twice in one month, to men of straw, increasing the purchase price each time. The last purchaser paid no less than three hundred thousand francs for it. Meanwhile Larsonneau alone appeared as the representative of the successive landlords, and worked the tenants. He pitilessly refused to renew the leases unless they consented to a formidable increase of rent. The tenants, who had an inkling of the approaching expropriation, were in despair; they ended by agreeing to the increase, especially when Larsonneau added, with a conciliatory air, that this increase should remain a fictitious one during the first five years. As for the tenants who were unaccommodating, they were replaced by creatures who received the apartment for nothing and signed anything they were asked to; in their case there was a double profit: the rent was raised, and the compensation due to the tenant for his lease went to Saccard. Madame Sidonie was so good as to assist her brother by setting up a pianoforte-agency in one of the shops on the ground-floor. It was then that Saccard and Larsonneau, seized with the fever of gain, went rather too far: they concocted business-books, they forged letters, so as to establish a trade in pianos on an immense footing. They scribbled away together for many nights. Worked in this fashion, the house trebled in value. Thanks to the last sale, thanks to the increase in the rents, to the fictitious tenants, and to Madame Sidonie's business, it was in a condition to be valued at five hundred thousand francs before the compensations commission.

The machinery of expropriation, of that powerful piece of mechanism that for fifteen years turned Paris topsy-turvy,

breathing fortune and ruin, is of the simplest. So soon as a new thoroughfare is decided upon, the surveyors of roads draw up the plan in separate sections and appraise the buildings. As a rule, in the case of houses let in apartments, they add up the total amount of the rents, after making enquiries, and are thus enabled to fix upon the approximate value. The compensations commission, consisting of members of the Municipal Council, always make an offer lower than this sum, knowing that the interested parties will claim more, and that there will be a concession on both sides. When they are unable to come to terms, the case is taken before a jury, which decides authoritatively upon the offer of the town and the claim of the evicted landlord or tenant.

Saccard, who had remained at the Hôtel de Ville for the decisive moment, had for one instant the impudence to wish to have himself appointed when the works of the Boulevard Malesherbes were begun, and himself to appraise his house. But he was afraid by so doing to paralyze his influence with the members of the compensations commission. He caused one of his colleagues to be chosen, a young man with a sweet smile, called Michelin, whose wife, an adorably pretty woman, occasionally called to apologize to her husband's chiefs for his absence, when he stayed away through ill-health. He was often ill. Saccard had noticed that the pretty Madame Michelin, who glided so humbly through the half-closed doorways, was omnipotent; Michelin obtained promotion at each illness, he made his career by taking to his bed. During one of his absences, when he was sending his wife almost every morning to the office to say how he was getting on, Saccard twice met him on the outer boulevards, smoking a cigar with the expression of rapt affection that never left him. This filled him with sympathy for this good young man, for that happy couple, so practical and so ingenious. He admired all "five-franc-piece machines" that were properly worked. When he had got Michelin appointed, he went and called on his charming wife, expressed a wish to introduce her

to Renée, talked before her of his brother the deputy, the brilliant orator. Madame Michelin understood.

From that day forward her husband kept his choicest smiles for his colleague. The latter, who had no desire to take the worthy fellow into his confidence, contented himself with being present, as though casually, on the day when the other proceeded to value the house in the Rue de la Pépinière. He assisted him. Michelin, who had the most insignificant and the emptiest head imaginable, followed the instructions of his wife, who had urged him to satisfy M. Saccard in all things. He suspected nothing, moreover; he thought the surveyor was in a hurry to see him finish his work so as to take him off to a café. The leases, the receipts for rent, Madame Sidonie's famous books, passed from his colleague's hands under his eyes without his even having time to verify the figures which the latter read aloud. Larsonneau was present, and treated his accomplice as a stranger.

"Come, put down five hundred thousand francs," Saccard ended by saying. "The house is worth more. . . . Hurry up; I believe there is going to be a change in the staff of the Hôtel de Ville, and I want to talk to you about it, so that you may let your wife know beforehand."

The business was thus carried through. But he still had fears. He dreaded lest the sum of five hundred thousand francs should seem rather excessive to the compensations commission for a house which was well known to be worth at most two hundred thousand. The formidable rise in house-property had not yet taken place. An enquiry would have caused him to run the risk of serious unpleasantness. He remembered his brother's words: "No flagrant scandal, or I'll exterminate you;" and he knew Eugène was the man to carry out his threat. It was a question of blindfolding those gentlemen of the commission, and ensuring their good will. He cast his eyes on two influential men, of whom he had made friends through his habit of saluting them in the corridors when he met them. The thirty-six members of the Municipal Council were carefully selected by the Em-

peror himself, on the recommendation of the préfet, from among the senators, deputies, advocates, doctors, and great manufacturers, who prostrated themselves the most devoutly before the reigning power; but among them all, the fervour of the Baron Gouraud and of M. Toutin-Laroche more especially attracted the good will of the Tuileries.

The whole of the Baron Gouraud is comprised in this short biography: he was made a baron by Napoleon I as a reward for supplying damaged biscuits to the Grand Army, he was a peer successively under Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis-Philippe, and he was a senator under Napoleon III. He worshipped the throne, the four gilded boards covered with velvet; It mattered little to him what man sat upon it. With his enormous belly, his bovine face, his elephantine movements, he boasted a delightful rascality; he sold himself majestically, and committed the greatest infamies in the name of duty and conscience. But the man was yet more astonishing in his vices. Stories were current about him which could not be told above a whisper. In spite of his seventy-eight years, he flourished in the midst of the most monstrous debauchery. It was necessary on two occasions to hush up some dirty adventure, so that his embroidered senator's coat should not be dragged through the dock of the assize-court.

M. Toutin-Laroche, tall and thin, had invented a mixture of tallow and stearine for the manufacture of candles, and longed to enter the Senate. He clung to the Baron Gouraud like a leech; he rubbed up against him with the vague idea that it would bring him luck. At bottom he was exceedingly practical; and had he come across a senator's seat for sale, he would have haggled fiercely over the price. The Empire was to bring into prominence this greedy nonentity, this narrow brain with its genius for industrial swindling. He was the first to sell his name to a shady company, one of those associations which sprouted like poisonous toadstools on the dunghill of imperial speculation. At that time one could see stuck on the walls a placard bearing these

words in big black letters: "Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco," on which the name of M. Toutin-Laroche, with his title of municipal councillor, was displayed at the head of the list of members of the board of directors, each more unknown than the other. This method, which has since been abused, succeeded admirably; the shares were snapped up, although the question of the Ports of Morocco was not a very definite one, and the worthy people who brought their money were not themselves able to explain to what use it was to be put. The placard spoke magniloquently of commercial stations to be established along the Mediterranean. For two years past certain of the newspapers had been hallowing this imposing undertaking, which they declared to be more prosperous every quarter. In the Municipal Council M. Toutin-Laroche was considered an administrator of the first water; he was one of the clever heads of the place, and his bitter tyranny over his colleagues was equalled only by his devout self-effacement in the presence of the préfet. He was now engaged upon the construction of a great financial company, the Crédit Viticole, a wine-growers' loan office, of which he spoke with a reticence and an air of solemnity that kindled the covetousness of the idiots around him.

Saccard secured the protection of these two personages by rendering them services whose importance he cleverly pretended to ignore. He introduced his sister to the baron at a time when the latter was mixed up in a very dirty scandal. He took her to see him under the pretence of soliciting his support in the favour of the dear woman, who had long been petitioning for an order for the supply of window-curtains to the Tuileries. But it so happened that when the surveyor of roads left them together, it was Madame Sidonie who promised the baron to negotiate with certain people who were clumsy enough not to have felt honoured by the friendship that a senator had condescended to shew to their child, a little girl of ten. Saccard took M. Toutin-Laroche in hand himself; he manœuvred so as to obtain an interview with him in the corridor, and led the

conversation to the famous Crédit Viticole. After five minutes the great administrator, dazed and astounded at the astonishing things he heard, took the clerk familiarly by the arm and detained him for a full hour in the corridor. Saccard whispered in his ear some financial schemes of prodigious ingenuity. When M. Toutin-Laroche left him, he pressed his hand in a meaning way with a masonic wink of the eye.

"You shall be there," he murmured, "you must be there."

He surpassed himself throughout this business. He carried his foresight as far as not to make the Baron Gouraud and M. Toutin-Laroche accomplices of one another. He called upon them separately, dropped a word in their ear in favour of one of his friends who was about to be bought out in the Rue de la Pépinière; he was very careful to tell each of the two confederates that he would not mention this business to any other member of the commission, that it was very uncertain, but that he reckoned on all his good will.

The surveyor of roads was right in being apprehensive and in taking his precautions. When the report relating to his house came before the compensations commission, it just happened that one of the members lived in the Rue d'Astorg and knew the house. This member raised a protest against the figure of five hundred thousand francs which, according to him, should be reduced by one-half. Aristide had had the impudence to have seven hundred thousand francs put down in the claim. But that day M. Toutin-Laroche, who was generally very disagreeable to his colleagues, was in a still more truculent mood than usual. He grew angry, he took up the defence of the landlords.

"We are all of us landlords, messieurs," he cried. . . . "The Emperor wishes to do things on a large scale, let us not haggle over trifles. . . . This house must be worth five hundred thousand francs; the amount was set down by one of our people, a clerk of the town. . . . Upon my word, one would think we were living in a den of thieves; you will see that we shall end by suspecting one another."

The Baron Gouraud, sitting squat in his chair, looked from the corner of his eye, with an air of surprise, at M. Toutin-Laroche raising fire and flames on behalf of the landlord of the Rue de la Pépinière. He had a suspicion. But after all, as this violent outburst saved him the trouble of speaking, he began to nod his head slowly, as a sign of complete approval. The member from the Rue d'Astorg indignantly resisted, refusing to bow before the two tyrants of the commission in a matter in which he was more competent than those gentlemen. At that moment M. Toutin-Laroche, noticing the baron's marks of approval, hastily seized the report and said, curtly:

"Very well. We'll dispel your doubts. . . . If you will allow me, I will take the matter in hand, and the Baron Gouraud shall join me in the enquiry."

"Yes, yes," said the Baron gravely, "nothing underhand must be allowed to taint our decisions."

The report had already vanished within M. Toutin-Laroche's capacious pockets. The commission had to give way. As they went out on to the quay, the two confederates looked at each other without a smile. They felt themselves to be accomplices, and this added to their assurance. Two vulgar minds would have sought an explanation; these two continued to plead the cause of the landlords, as though they could still be overheard, and to deprecate the spirit of distrust that was filtering through everything. Just as they were about to separate:

"Ah, I was forgetting, my dear colleague," said the Baron, with a smile. "I am going into the country almost at once. It would be very kind of you to go and make this little enquiry without me. . . . And above all don't give me away, our friends complain that I take too many holidays."

"Be easy," replied M. Toutin-Laroche, "I shall go straight to the Rue de la Pépinière."

He went quietly to his own house, not without a touch of admiration for the baron, who had such a pretty way of unravelling a delicate position. He kept the report in his pocket,

and at the next sitting he declared peremptorily, in the baron's name and his own, that they should split the difference between the offer of five hundred thousand and the claim of seven hundred thousand francs, and allow six hundred thousand. There was not the slightest opposition. The member from the Rue d'Astorg, who had no doubt thought it over, said with great good-nature that he had been mistaken: he thought it was the next house that was in question.

In this way did Aristide Saccard win his first victory. He quadrupled his outlay and secured two accomplices. One thing alone perturbed him; when he wanted to destroy Madame Sidonie's famous account-books, he was unable to find them. He hastened to Larsonneau, who boldly avowed that he had them and that he meant to keep them. The other showed no vexation; he suggested that he had only been anxious on account of his dear friend, who was much more compromised than himself by these entries, which were almost entirely in his handwriting, but that he was reassured so soon as he knew they were in his keeping. At heart he would have been delighted to strangle his "dear friend;" he remembered a particularly compromising document, a false inventory which he had been fool enough to draw up, and which he knew had been left in one of the ledgers. Larsonneau, handsomely remunerated, set up a business-agency in the Rue de Rivoli, where he had a suite of offices furnished as luxuriously as a courtesan's rooms. Saccard left the Hôtel de Ville and, being in command of considerable funds to work with, launched furiously into speculation, while Renée, in mad intoxication, filled Paris with the clatter of her equipages, the sparkle of her diamonds, the vertigo of her adorably riotous existence.

Sometimes the husband and wife, those two feverish devotees of money and of pleasure, would penetrate the icy mists of the Île Saint-Louis. They felt as though they were entering a city of the dead.

The Hôtel Béraud, built about the beginning of the sixteenth

century, was one of those square black, solemn edifices, with tall, narrow windows, which are numerous in the Marais, and are let to proprietors of schools, to manufacturers of aërated waters, and to bonders of wines and spirits. Only it was in admirable preservation. On the Rue Saint-Louis side it had only three stories, each fifteen to twenty feet in height. The ground-floor was not so lofty, and was pierced with windows protected by enormous iron bars and sunk dismally into the gloomy thickness of the walls, and with an arched gateway almost as tall as it was broad, and bearing a cast-iron knocker on its doors, which were painted dark-green and studded with enormous nails that formed stars and lozenges on the two folds. This characteristic entrance was flanked on either side with spur-posts sloping backwards, and strapped with broad iron bands. One could see that formerly a gutter had run under the middle of the gateway, between the weatherings of the pebble-work of the porch; but M. Béraud had decided to stop up this gutter and have the entrance asphalted: this, however, was the only concession he could ever be persuaded to make to modern architecture. The windows of the upper floors were ornamented with thin hand-rails of wrought iron, through which could be seen their colossal casements of strong brown woodwork with little green panes. At the top the roof was interrupted by the dormers, and the gutter alone continued its course so as to discharge the rain-water into the down-pipes. And what still further increased the severe nakedness of the façade was the entire absence of awnings or shutters, for at no season of the year did the sun shine on those pale, melancholy stones. This façade with its venerable air, its burgher severity, slumbered solemnly amid the self-absorption of the district, in the silence of the street that no carriage ever disturbed.

In the interior of the mansion was a square court-yard, surrounded by a colonnade, a reduced copy of the Place Royale, paved with enormous flags, and completing the cloistral appearance of this lifeless house. Opposite the porch a fountain, a

lion's head half worn away, its gaping jaws alone distinguishable, discharged a heavy, monotonous stream of water through an iron tube into a basin green with moss, its edges polished by wear. This water was cold as ice. Weeds sprouted between the flagstones. In the summer a meagre ray of sunlight entered the court-yard, and this infrequent visit had whitened a corner of the south façade, while the three other walls, morose and black, were streaked with moisture. There, in the depth of that court-yard, cold and silent as a well, lighted with a white, wintry light, one would have thought one's self a thousand leagues away from that new Paris in which every passionate enjoyment flamed amid the racket of gold.

The rooms of the house had the sad calm, the cold solemnity of the court-yard. Approached by a broad iron-railed staircase, on which the footsteps and coughs of visitors resounded as in the aisle of a church, they stretched in long strings of wide, lofty rooms, in which the old-fashioned, heavy furniture of dark wood was lost; and the pale light was peopled only by the figures on the tapestries, whose great, pallid bodies could be vaguely discerned. There was all the luxury of the old-fashioned Parisian middle-class, a luxury that is Spartan and all-enduring. Chairs whose oak seats are barely covered with a little tow, beds with stiff sheets, linen-chests the roughness of whose boards would strangely endanger the frail existence of modern garments. M. Béraud du Châtel had selected his rooms in the darkest part of the mansion, between the street and the court-yard, on the first floor. He there found himself in a wonderful surrounding of peacefulness, silence, and gloom. When he opened the doors, traversing the solemnity of the rooms with his slow, serious step, he might have been taken for one of those members of the old parliaments, whose portraits were hung on the walls, returning home wrapt in thought after discussing and refusing to sign an edict of the king.

Yet in this lifeless house, in this cloister, there was one warm nest full of life, a corner of sunshine and gaiety, a nook of

adorable childhood, of fresh air, of bright light. One had to climb a host of little stairways, pass along ten or twelve corridors, go down and up again, make a positive journey, and then at last one reached a huge room, a sort of belvedere built on the roof, at the back of the house, over above the Quai de Béthune. It looked due South. The window opened so wide that the heavens, with all their sunbeams, all their ether, all their blue, seemed to enter there. It was perched aloft like a dovecot, and contained long flower-boxes, an immense aviary, and not a single article of furniture. There was only just some matting spread over the floor. This was "the children's room." All over the house it was known and spoken of by that name. The house was so cold, the court-yard so damp, that Aunt Elisabeth had dreaded lest Christine and Renée should suffer harm from the chill breath that hung about the walls; many a time had she scolded the children for running about the arcades and amusing themselves by dipping their little arms into the icy water of the fountain. Thereupon she conceived the idea of making use of this forgotten attic for them, the only corner into which the sun had, for nearly two centuries, entered and rejoiced, in the midst of the cobwebs. She gave them some matting, birds, and flowers. The bairns were wild with delight. Renée lived there during the holidays, bathing in the yellow rays of that good sun, who seemed pleased with the decorations lavished upon his retreat and with the two fair-haired heads sent to keep him company. The room became a paradise, ever resounding with the song of the birds and the children's babbling. It had been yielded to them for their exclusive use. They spoke of "our room;" it was their home; they went so far as to lock themselves in so as to put it beyond doubt that they were the sole mistresses of the room. What a happy nook! On the matting lay a massacre of playthings, expiring in the bright sunshine.

But the great delight of the children's room was the vastness of the horizon. From the other windows of the house there was nothing to look at but black walls, a few feet away. But

from this window one could see all that part of the Seine, all that piece of Paris which extends from the Cité to the Pont de Bercy, boundlessly flat, resembling some quaint Dutch city. Down below, on the Quai de Béthune, were tumble-down wooden sheds, accumulations of beams and crumbling roofs, amid which the children often amused themselves by watching enormous rats run about, with a vague fear of seeing them clamber up the high walls. But beyond all this the real rapture began. The boom, with its tiers of timbers, its buttresses resembling those of a Gothic cathedral, and the slender Pont de Constantine, hanging like a strip of lace beneath the wayfarers' footsteps: crossed each other at right angles, and seemed to dam up and keep within bounds the huge mass of the river. The trees of the Halle aux Vins opposite and the shrubberies of the Jardin des Plantes, further away, spread out their greenness to the distant horizon: while on the other bank of the river the Quai Henri IV and the Quai de la Rapée extended their low and irregular edifices, their row of houses which, from above, resembled the tiny wood and cardboard houses which the little girls kept in boxes. In the background on the right the slated roof of the Saltpêtrière rose blue above the trees. Then, in the centre, sloping down to the Seine, the wide-paved banks formed two long gray tracks, streaked here and there by a row of casks, a cart and its team, an empty wood or coal-barge lying high and dry. But the soul of all this, the soul that filled the whole landscape, was the Seine, the living river; it came from afar, from the vaguely-shimmering edge of the horizon, it emerged from the distance, as from a dream, to flow straight down to the children with its tranquil majesty, its puissant swell, which spread and widened itself into a great sheet of water at their feet, at the extremity of the island. The two bridges that crossed it, the Pont de Bercy and the Pont d'Austerlitz, looked like necessary boundaries placed there to contain it, to prevent it from surging up to the room. The little ones loved this giant, they filled their eyes with its colossal flux, with that eternal murmur-

ing flood which rolled towards them as though to reach them, and which branched out to left and right, and disappeared into the unknown with the docility of a conquered Titan. On fine days, on mornings when the sky hung blue overhead, they would be enraptured with the pretty dresses of the Seine; it wore dresses of a changeable hue that altered from blue to green with a thousand tints of infinite tenderness; dresses of silk shot with white flames and trimmed with frills of satin; and the barges drawn up on either bank bordered it with a black velvet ribbon. In the distance, especially, the material became beautiful and precious as the enchanted gauze of a fairy's robe; and, beyond the belt of dark-green satin with which the shadow of the bridges girdled the Seine, were breast-plates of gold and lappets of a plaited sun-coloured stuff. The immense sky formed a vault over the water, over the low rows of houses, over the green of the two parks.

Sometimes Renée, wearied of this unbounded horizon, a big girl already, and full of a fleshly curiosity brought back from her boarding-school, would throw a glance into the swimming school attached to Petit's floating baths, which were moored to the end of the island. She sought to catch a glimpse, through the flapping linen cloths hung up on lines to serve as a roof, of the men in bathing-drawers showing their naked bellies.

CHAPTER III

Maxime remained at school at Plassans until the holidays of 1854. He was a few months over thirteen, and had just passed the fifth class. It was then that his father decided to let him come to Paris. He reflected that a son of that age would give him a certain position, would fix him definitively in the part he played of a wealthy widower, twice married, and serious in his views. When he informed Renée, towards whom he prided himself upon his extreme gallantry, of his intention, she answered, negligently:

"That's right, have the boy up. . . . He will amuse us a little. One is bored to death in the mornings."

The boy arrived a week later. He was already a tall, spare stripling, with a girl's face, a delicate, forward look, and very light flaxen hair. But great God! how oddly he was got up! He was cropped to the ears, his hair was cut so short that the whiteness of his cranium was barely covered with a shadow of pale down, he wore trousers too short for him, hob-nailed shoes, a hideously threadbare tunic that was much too wide and made him look almost hunchbacked. In this garb, surprised at the new things he saw, he looked about him, not at all timidly, but with the savage, cunning air of a precocious child, that is loth to come out of its shell at first sight.

A servant had just fetched him from the station, and he was waiting in the big drawing-room, charmed with the gilding on the ceiling and furniture, thoroughly delighted with this luxury in which he was about to spend his life, when Renée, returning from her tailor, swept in like a gust of wind. She threw off her hat and the white burnoose which she had placed over her shoulders to protect her from the cold, which was already keen.

She appeared before Maxime, who was stupefied with admiration, in all the brilliancy of her marvellous attire.

The child thought she was dressed up. She wore a delicious skirt of blue faille, with deep flounces, and over that a sort of French-guard's coat in pale-gray silk. The flaps of the coat, lined with blue satin of a deeper shade than the faille of the skirt, were bravely caught up and secured with knots of ribbon; the cuffs of the flat sleeves, the broad lapels of the bodice stood out wide, trimmed with the same satin. And as a supreme effort of trimming, as a bold stroke of eccentricity, two rows of large buttons imitating sapphires and fastening into blue rosettes, adorned the front of the coat. It was ugly and entrancing.

When Renée perceived Maxime:

"It's the boy, is it not?" asked she of the servant, surprised to find him as tall as herself.

The child was devouring her with his eyes. This lady with a skin so white, whose bosom showed through a gap of her plaited shirt-front, this sudden and charming apparition, with her hair dressed high, her elegant, gloved hands, her little Wellington boots with pointed heels that dug into the carpet, delighted him, seemed to him to be the good fairy of this warm, gilded room. He began to smile, and he was just sufficiently awkward to retain his urchin gracefulness.

"Why, he is quite amusing!" cried Renée. . . . "But what a shame! how they have cut his hair! . . . Listen, my little friend, your father will probably not come in till dinner-time, and I shall have to make you at home. . . . I am your stepmother, monsieur. Will you give me a kiss?"

"Yes, if you like," answered Maxime, boldly.

And he kissed Renée on both cheeks, taking her by the shoulders, whereby the French-guard's coat was a little rumpled. She freed herself, laughing, saying:

"Oh dear, how amusing he is, the little shaveling! . . ."

She came back to him, more serious.

"We shall be friends, sha'n't we? . . . I want to be a mother

to you. I was thinking about it while I was waiting for my tailor, who was engaged, and I said to myself that I must be very kind and bring you up quite properly. . . . That will be nice! "

Maxime continued to stare at her with his blue forward girl's eyes, and suddenly:

" How old are you? " he asked.

" But you should never ask that! " she cried, clasping her hands together. . . . " He knows nothing, poor little wretch! He will have to be taught everything. . . . Luckily I can still tell my age. I am twenty-one."

" I shall soon be fourteen. . . . You might be my sister."

He did not go on, but his look added that he had expected to find his father's second wife much older. He was standing quite close to her, and examining her neck so attentively that she almost ended by blushing. Her giddy head, moreover, was turning: it was never able to fix itself long on the same subject; and she began to walk about, to speak of her tailor, forgetting she was talking to a child.

" I wanted to be here to receive you. But think, Worms brought me this dress this morning. . . . I tried it on and I thought it rather successful. It is very smart, is it not? "

She had moved before a mirror. Maxime walked to and fro behind her so as to examine her on every side.

" Only," she continued, " when I put on the coat, I noticed there was a large fold, there, on the left shoulder, d'you see? . . . That fold is very ugly, it makes me look as if I had one shoulder higher than the other."

He came up to her and pressed his finger over the fold as though to smooth it down, and his vicious school-boy hand seemed to linger on that spot with a certain satisfaction.

" Well," she continued, " I couldn't wait. I had the horses put to, and I went to tell Worms what I thought of his outrageous carelessness. . . . He promised me to put it right."

Thereupon she remained before the mirror, still looking at

herself, lost in a sudden reverie. She ended by laying one finger on her lips, with an air of contemplative impatience. And quite low, as if talking to herself:

"It wants something. . . . Yes, really, it wants something. . . ."

Then, with a quick movement, she turned round, placed herself in front of Maxime, and asked him:

"Is it really right? . . . Don't you think it wants something, a trifle, a bow somewhere or other? "

The school-boy was reassured by Renée's familiarity, and resumed all the assurance of his forward nature. He drew back, came nearer, screwed up his eyes, and murmured:

"No, no, it wants nothing, it's very pretty, very pretty indeed. . . . If anything, I think there is something too much."

He blushed a little, despite his audacity, came nearer still, and with his finger-tip tracing an acute angle on Renée's breast:

"If I were you," he continued, "I would hollow out that lace so, and wear a necklace with a great big cross."

She clapped her hands, radiant with delight.

"That's it, that's it," she exclaimed. . . . "I had the great big cross on the tip of my tongue."

She folded back the chemisette, left the room for two minutes, and returned with the necklace and cross. And resuming her place in front of the mirror she murmured triumphantly:

"Oh, perfect, quite perfect. . . . But he's no fool, that little shaveling! Used you to dress the girls in the country, then? You and I are sure to get on well together. But you will have to do as I tell you. In the first place, you must let your hair grow and never wear that horrid tunic again. Then you must faithfully follow my lessons in good manners. I want you to become a smart young man."

"But, of course," said the child naïvely; "since papa is rich now and you are his wife."

She smiled, and with her customary vivacity:

"Then let us begin by dropping the plural. I have been

saying thou and you anyhow. It's too silly. . . . Will you love me very much? "

"I will love you with all my heart," he replied, with the effusiveness of a boy towards his sweetheart.

Such was the first interview between Maxime and Renée. The child did not go to school till a month later. During the first few days his step-mother played with him as with a doll; she brushed off his country manners, and it must be added that he seconded her with extreme willingness. When he appeared, newly arrayed from head to foot by his father's tailor, she uttered a cry of joyous surprise: he looked as pretty as a daisy, she said. Only his hair took an unconscionable time in growing. Renée used always to say that all one's face lay in one's hair. She tended her own devoutly. For a long time she had been maddened by the colour of it, that peculiar pale yellow colour which reminded one of good butter. But when yellow hair came into fashion she was delighted, and to make believe that she did not follow the fashion because she could not help herself, she swore she dyed it every month.

Maxime was already terribly knowing for his thirteen years. He was one of those frail, precocious natures in which the senses assert themselves early. He had vices before he knew the meaning of desire. He had twice narrowly escaped being expelled from school. Had Renée's eyes been accustomed to provincial graces, she would have perceived that, strangely got-up though he was, the little shaveling, as she called him, had a way of smiling, of turning his neck, of putting out his arms prettily, with the feminine air of the love-boys at school. He took great pains over his hands, which were long and slender; and though his hair was cropped short by order of the head-master, an ex-colonel of engineers, he owned a little looking-glass which he drew from his pocket during school-time and placed between the leaves of his book, looking at himself in it for hours, examining his eyes, his gums, pulling pretty faces, studying the art of coquetry. His school-fellows hung round his blouse as round

a petticoat, and he buckled his belt so tightly that he had the slim waist and undulating hips of a grown woman. True it was, he received as many kicks as kisses. And so the school at Plassans, a den of little miscreants like most provincial schools, was a hotbed of pollution in which were singularly developed that epicene temperament, that childhood fraught with evil from some mysterious hereditary cause. Fortunately, age was about to improve him. But the sign of his boyish debauchery, this effemination of his whole being what time he had played the girl, was destined to remain in him, and to strike a lasting blow at his virility.

Renée called him "Mademoiselle," not knowing that six months earlier she would have hit the truth. He seemed to her very docile, very affectionate, and indeed his caresses often made her feel ill-at-ease. He had a way of kissing that heated the skin. But what delighted her was his roguishness; he was as entertaining as could be, and bold, already talking of women with a smile, holding his own against Renée's friends, against dear Adeline who had just married M. d'Espanet, and the fat Suzanne, wedded quite recently to Haffner, the big manufacturer. When he was fourteen he fell in love with the latter. He confided his passion to his step-mother, who was intensely amused.

"For myself I should have preferred Adeline," she said, "she is prettier."

"Perhaps so," replied the scapegrace, "but Suzanne is much stouter. . . . I like fine women. . . . If you were very good-natured, you would put in a word for me."

Renée laughed. Her doll, this tall lad with the girl's ways, seemed to her inimitable now that he had fallen in love. The time came when Mme. Haffner had seriously to defend herself. For the rest the ladies encouraged Maxime by their stifled laughter, their unfinished sentences, and the coquettish attitudes they assumed in presence of the precocious child. There was a touch of very aristocratic debauchery in this. All three, in the midst

of their life of tumult, scorched by passion, lingered over the boy's delicious depravity as over a novel and harmless spice that stimulated their palates. They allowed him to touch their dresses, to pass his fingers over their shoulders when he followed them into the ante-room to help them on with their wraps; they passed him from hand to hand, laughing like madwomen when he kissed their wrists on the veined side, on the place where the skin is so soft; and then they became motherly, and learnedly instructed him in the art of being a smart man and pleasing the ladies. He was their plaything, a little toy man of ingenious workmanship, that kissed, and made love, and had the sweetest vices in the world, but remained a plaything, a little cardboard man that one need not be too much afraid of, only just sufficiently to feel a very pleasant thrill at the touch of his childish hand.

After the holidays Maxime went to the Lycée Bonaparte. It was the fashionable public school, the one that Saccard was bound to choose for his son. The child, soft and light-headed though he was, had by that time a very quick intelligence; but he applied himself to far other things than his classical studies. He was nevertheless a well-behaved pupil, who never descended to the Bohemian level of dunces, and who forgathered with the proper and well-dressed young gentlemen of whom nothing was ever said. All that remained to him of his boyhood was a veritable cult of dress. Paris opened his eyes, turned him into a smart young man, with tight-fitting clothes of the latest fashion. He was the Brummel of his form. He appeared there as he would in a drawing-room, daintily booted, correctly gloved, with prodigious neckties and unutterable hats. There were about twenty like him in all, who formed a sort of aristocracy, offering one another, as they left the school, Havannah cigars out of gold-clasped cigar-cases, and having servants in livery to carry their parcels of books. Maxime had persuaded his father to buy him a tilbury and a little black horse, which were the admiration of his school-fellows. He drove himself,

while a footman sat with folded arms on the back seat, holding on his knees the schoolboy's knapsack, a real ministerial portfolio in brown grained leather. And you should have seen how lightly, how cleverly, and with what excellent form Maxime drove in ten minutes from the Rue de Rivoli to the Rue du Havre, drew up his horse before the school-door, threw the reins to the footman, and said:

"Jacques, at half-past four, see?"

The neighbouring shopkeepers were delighted with the fine grace of this fair-haired spark whom they saw regularly twice a day arriving and leaving in his trap. On returning home he sometimes gave a lift to a friend, whom he set down at his door. The two children smoked, looked at the women, splashed the passers-by, as though they were returning from the races. An astonishing little world, a foolish, foppish brood which you can see any day in the Rue du Havre, smartly dressed in their dandy jackets, aping the ways of rich and worn-out men, while the Bohemian contingent of the school, the real school-boys, come shouting and shoving, stamping on the pavement with their thick shoes, with their books hung over their backs by a strap.

Renée, who took herself seriously as a mother and as a governess, was delighted with her pupil. She left nothing undone, in fact, to complete his education. She was at that time passing through a period of mortification and tears; a lover had jilted her openly, before the eyes of all Paris, to attach himself to the Duchesse de Sternich. She dreamt of Maxime as her consolation, she made herself older, she racked her brains to appear maternal, and became the most eccentric mentor imaginable. Often would Maxime's tilbury be left at home, and Renée come to fetch the schoolboy in her big calash. They hid the brown portfolio under the seat and drove to the Bois, then in all the freshness of novelty. There she put him through a course of tip-top elegance. She pointed everyone out to him in the fat and happy Paris of the Empire, still under the ecstasy of that

stroke of the wand which had changed yesterday's starvelings and swindlers into great lords and millionaires snorting and swooning under the weight of their cash-boxes. But the child questioned her above all about the women, and as she was very familiar with him, she gave him exact particulars: Madame du Guende was stupid but admirably made; the Comtesse Vanska, a very rich woman, had been a street-singer before marrying a Pole who beat her, so they said; as to the Marquise d'Espanet and Suzanne Haffner, they were inseparable, and though they were Renée's intimate friends, she added, compressing her lips as if to prevent herself from saying more, that some very nasty stories were told about them; the beautiful Madame de Lauwerens also was a terribly compromising woman, but she had such fine eyes, and after all everybody knew that she herself was quite above reproach, although she was a little too much mixed up in the intrigues of the poor little women who frequented her, Madame Daste, Madame Teissière, and the Baronne de Meinhold. Maxime obtained the portraits of these ladies, and with them filled an album that lay on the table in the drawing-room. With that vicious artfulness which was the dominant note in his character, he tried to embarrass his stepmother by asking for particulars about the fast women, pretending to take them for ladies in society. Renée became serious and moral, and told him that they were horrid creatures and that he must be careful and keep away from them; and then forgetting herself, she spoke of them as of people whom she had known intimately. One of the youngster's great delights, again, was to get her on to the subject of the Duchesse de Sternich. Each time her carriage passed theirs in the Bois, he never failed to mention the duchess's name, with wicked slyness and an under-glance that showed that he knew of Renée's last adventure. Whereupon in a harsh voice she tore her rival to pieces: how old she was growing! Poor woman! She made-up her face, she had lovers hidden in all her cupboards, she had sold herself to a chamberlain that she might procure admission to the

imperial bed. And she ran on, while Maxime, to exasperate her, declared that he thought Madame de Sternich delicious. Such lessons as these singularly developed the school-boy's intelligence, the more so as the young teacher repeated them wherever they went, in the Bois, at the theatre, at parties. The pupil became very proficient.

What Maxime loved was to live among women's skirts, in the midst of their finery, in their rice-powder. He always remained more or less of a girl, with his slim hands, his beardless face, his plump white neck. Renée consulted him seriously about her gowns. He knew the good makers of Paris, summed each of them up in a word, talked about the cunningness of such an one's bonnets and the logic of such another's dresses. At seventeen there was not a milliner whom he had not probed, not a bootmaker whom he had not studied through and through. This quaint abortion, who during his English lessons read the prospectuses which his perfumer sent him every Friday, could have delivered a brilliant lecture on the fashionable Paris world, customers and purveyors included, at an age when country urchins dare not look their housemaid in the face. Frequently, on his way home from school, he would bring back in his tilbury a bonnet, a box of soap, or a piece of jewellery which his stepmother had ordered the preceding day. He had always some strip of musk-scented lace hanging about in his pockets.

But his great treat was to go with Renée to the illustrious Worms, the tailor genius to whom the queens of the Second Empire bowed the knee. The great man's show-room was wide and square, and furnished with huge divans. Maxime entered it with religious emotion. Dresses undoubtedly have a perfume of their own; silk, satin, velvet and lace had mingled their faint aromas with those of hair and of amber-scented shoulders; and the atmosphere of the room retained that sweet-smelling warmth, that fragrance of flesh and of luxury, which transformed the apartment into a chapel consecrated to some secret divinity. It was often necessary for Renée and Maxime to wait for hours;

a series of anxious women sat there, waiting their turn, dipping biscuits into glasses of Madeira, helping themselves from the great table in the middle, which was covered with bottles and plates full of cakes. The ladies were at home, they talked without restraint, and when they ensconced themselves around the room, it was as though a flight of white Lesbian doves had alighted on the sofas of a Parisian drawing-room. Maxime, whom they endured and loved for his girlish air, was the only man admitted into the circle. He there tasted delights divine; he glided along the sofas like a supple adder; he was discovered under a skirt, behind a bodice, between two dresses, where he made himself quite small and kept very quiet, inhaling the warm fragrance of his neighbours with the demeanour of a choir-boy partaking of the sacrament.

"That child pokes his nose in everywhere," said the Baronne de Meinhold, tapping his cheeks.

He was so slightly built that the ladies did not think him more than fourteen. They amused themselves by making him tipsy with the illustrious Worms's Madeira. He made astounding speeches to them, which made them laugh till they cried. However, it was the Marquise d'Espanet who found the right word to describe the position. One day when Maxime was discovered behind her back in a corner of the divan:

"That boy ought to have been born a girl," she murmured, on seeing him so pink, blushing, penetrated with the satisfaction he had enjoyed from her proximity.

Then, when the great Worms at last received Renée, Maxime followed her into the consultation room. He had ventured to speak on two or three occasions while the master remained absorbed in the contemplation of his client, as the high-priests of the Beautiful hold that Leonardo da Vinci did in the presence of la Gioconda. The master had deigned to smile upon the correctness of his observations. He made Renée stand up before a glass which rose from the floor to the ceiling, and pondered with knit brows, while Renée, seized with emotion, held her breath,

so as not to stir. And after a few minutes the master, as though seized and moved by inspiration, sketched in broad, jerky strokes the work of art which he had just conceived, ejaculating in short phrases:

"A Montespan dress in pale-gray faille . . . the skirt describing a rounded basque in front . . . large gray satin bows to catch it up on the hips . . . and a puffed apron of pearl-gray tulle, the puffs separated by strips of gray satin."

He pondered once again, seemed to descend to the very depths of his genius, and, with the triumphant facial contortion of a pythoness on her tripod, concluded:

"We will have in the hair, on the top of this bonny head, Psyche's dreamy butterfly, with wings of changeful blue."

But at other times inspiration was stubborn. The illustrious Worms summoned it in vain, and concentrated his faculties to no purpose. He distorted his eyebrows, turned livid, took his poor head between his hands and shook it in his despair, and beaten, throwing himself into an arm-chair:

"No," he would mutter, in a pitiful voice, "no, not to-day. . . . It is not possible. . . . You ladies expect too much. The source is exhausted."

And he showed Renée out, repeating:

"Impossible, impossible, dear lady, you must come back another day. . . . I don't grasp you this morning."

The fine education that Maxime received had a first result. At seventeen the young scapegrace seduced his step-mother's maid. The worst of the affair was that the lady's-maid got a baby. They had to send her into the country with the brat, and to buy her a little annuity. Renée was horribly annoyed at this incident. Saccard did not interfere except to arrange the financial part of the question; but his young wife scolded her pupil roundly. That he, of whom she wanted to make a distinguished man, should compromise himself with a girl like that! What a ridiculous, disgraceful beginning, what a discreditable exploit! He might at least have led off with a lady!

"Quite true!" he replied quietly, "if your dear friend Suzanne had been willing, it was she who might have been sent to the country."

"Oh! the scamp!" she murmured, disarmed, enlivened with the idea of seeing Suzanne retiring to the country with an annuity of twelve hundred francs.

Then a funnier thought occurred to her, and forgetting that she was playing the indignant mother, bursting into pearly laughter which she restrained with her fingers, she stammered, giving him a sidelong glance:

"I say, how you would have caught it from Adeline, and what a scene she would have made her. . . ."

She did not finish. Maxime and she were screaming. Such was the fine catastrophe of Renée's lecture on this incident.

Meanwhile Saccard troubled himself not at all about the two children, as he called his son and his second wife. He left them absolute liberty, glad to see them such good friends, whereby the flat was filled with noisy merriment. A singular apartment, this first floor in the Rue de Rivoli. The doors were slamming to and fro all day long. The servants talked loud; its new and dazzling luxury was continually traversed by a flood of vast, floating skirts, by processions of tradespeople, by the uproar of Renée's friends, Maxime's chums and Saccard's callers. From nine to eleven the last received the strangest set imaginable: senators and bailiffs' clerks, duchesses and old-clothes-women, all the scum that the tempests of Paris hurled at his door every morning, silk gowns, dirty skirts, blouses, dress-coats, all of whom he received with the same hurried manner, the same impatient, nervous gestures; he clinched bits of business with two words, got rid of twenty difficulties at a time, and gave solutions at a run. One would have thought that this restless little man with the very loud voice was fighting with people in his study, and with the furniture, tumbling head over heels, knocking his head against the ceiling to make his ideas flash out, and always falling triumphantly on his feet. Then at eleven

o'clock he went out; he was not seen again during the day; he breakfasted out, he often even dined out. From that time the house belonged to Renée and Maxime; they took possession of the father's study; they unpacked the tradesmen's parcels there, and articles of finery lay about among the business-papers. Sometimes serious people had to wait for an hour at the study-door while the school-boy and the young married woman discussed a bow of ribbon, seated at either end of Saccard's writing-table. Renée had the horses put to ten times a day. They rarely had a meal together; two of the three would be rushing about, forgetting themselves, staying out till midnight. An apartment of racket, of business, and of pleasure, through which modern life, with its noise of jingling gold, of rustling skirts, swept like a whirlwind.

Aristide Saccard was in his element at last. He had revealed himself a great speculator, a brewer of millions. After the master-stroke in the Rue de la Pépinière, he threw himself boldly into the struggle which was beginning to fill Paris with shameful wreckages and lightning triumphs. He began by gambling on certainties, repeating his first successful stroke, buying up houses which he knew to be threatened with the pickaxe, and utilizing his friends in order to obtain fat compensation. The moment came when he had five or six houses, those houses that he had looked at so curiously, as though they were acquaintances of his, in the days when he was only a poor surveyor of roads. But these were the mere first steps of art. There was no great cleverness wanted to run out leases, conspire with the tenants, and rob the State and individuals; nor did he think the game worth the candle. For which reason he soon made use of his genius for transactions of a more complicated character.

Saccard first invented the trick of making secret purchases of house-property on the city's account. A decision of the Council of State had placed the Municipality in a difficult position. It had acquired by private contract a large number of houses, in the hope of running out the leases and turning the tenants out

without compensation. But these purchases were pronounced to be genuine acts of expropriations, and the city had to pay. It was then that Saccard offered to lend his name to the city: he bought houses, ran out the leases, and for a consideration handed over the property at a fixed date. And he even ended by playing a double game: he acted as buyer both for the Municipality and for the préfet. Whenever the thing was irresistibly tempting, he stuck to the house himself. The State paid. In reward for his assistance he received building concessions for bits of streets, for open spaces, which he disposed of in his turn even before the new thoroughfare was commenced. It was a fierce gamble: the new streets were speculated in as one speculates in stocks and shares. Certain ladies were in the swim, handsome girls, intimately connected with some of the higher functionaries; one of them, whose white teeth are world-renowned, has nibbled up whole streets on more than one occasion. Saccard was insatiable, he felt his greed grow at the sight of the flood of gold that glided through his fingers. It seemed to him as though a sea of twenty-franc pieces extended about him, swelling from a lake to an ocean, filling the vast horizon with a sound of strange waves, a metallic music that tickled his heart; and he grew adventurous, plunging more boldly every day, diving and coming up again, now on his back, then on his belly, swimming through this immensity in fair weather and foul, and relying on his strength and skill to prevent him from ever sinking to the bottom.

Paris was at that time disappearing in a cloud of plaster. The days predicted by Saccard on the Buttes Montmartre had come. The city was being slashed with sabre-cuts, and he had a finger in every gash, in every wound. He had belonging to him demolished houses in every quarter of the city. In the Rue de Rome he was mixed up in that astounding story of the pit which was dug by a company in order to carry away five or six thousand cubic mètres of soil and create a belief in gigantic works, and which had afterwards to be filled up, on the failure of the company, by bringing the soil back from Saint-Ouen. Saccard came

out of this with an easy conscience and full pockets, thanks to the friendly intervention of his brother Eugène. At Chaillot he assisted in cutting through the heights and throwing them into a hollow in order to make way for the boulevard that runs from the Arc de Triomphe to the Pont d'Alma. In the direction of Passy it was he who conceived the idea of scattering the refuse of the Trocadéro over the high level, so that to this day the good soil is buried two mètres below the surface, and the very weeds refuse to grow through the rubbish. He was to be found in twenty places at once, at every spot where there was some insurmountable obstacle, a heap of rubbish that no one knew what to do with, a hollow that could not be filled up, a great mass of soil and plaster over which the engineers in their feverish haste grew impatient, but in which he rummaged with his nails, and invariably ended by finding some bonus or some speculation to his taste. On the same day he ran from the works at the Arc de Triomphe to those at the Boulevard Saint-Michel, from the clearings in the Boulevard Malesherbes to the embankments at Chaillot, dragging after him an army of workmen, lawyers, shareholders, dupes, and swindlers.

But his purest glory was the Crédit Viticole, which he had founded with Toutin-Laroche. The latter was the official director; he himself only figured as a member of the board. In this connection Eugène had done his brother another good turn. Thanks to him the Government authorized the company and watched over its career with great good nature. On one delicate occasion, when a malignant journal ventured to criticise one of the company's operations, the *Moniteur* went so far as to publish a note forbidding any discussion of so honourable an undertaking, one which the State deigned to protect. The Crédit Viticole was based upon an excellent financial system: it lent the wine-growers half of the estimated value of their property, ensured the repayment of the loan by a mortgage, and received interest from the borrowers in addition to instalments of the principal. Never was there mechanism more prudent or more worthy. Eugène

had declared to his brother, with a knowing smile, that the Tuileries expected people to be honest. M. Toutin-Laroche interpreted this wish by allowing the wine-growers' loan-office to work quietly, and founding by its side a banking-house which attracted capital and gambled feverishly, launching out into every sort of adventure. Thanks to the formidable impulse it received from its director, the Crédit Viticole soon achieved a well-established reputation for solidity and prosperity. At the outset, in order to offer at the Bourse in one job a mass of shares on which no dividend had yet been paid, and to give them the appearance of having been long in circulation, Saccard had the ingenuity to have them trodden on and beaten, a whole night long, by the bank-messengers, armed with birch-brooms. The place resembled a branch of the Bank of France. The house occupied by the offices, with its court-yard full of private carriages, its austere iron railings, its broad flight of steps and its monumental staircase, its suites of luxurious reception-rooms, its world of clerks and of liveried lackeys, seemed to be the grave, dignified temple of Mammon; and nothing filled the public with a more religious emotion than the sanctuary, the cashier's office, which was approached by a corridor of hallowed bareness and contained the safe, the god, crouching, embedded in the wall, squat and somnolent, with its triple lock, its massive flanks, its air of a brute divinity.

Saccard carried through a big job with the Municipality. The latter was greatly in debt, was crushed by its debts, dragged into this dance of gold which it had led off to please the Emperor and to fill certain people's pockets, and was now reduced to borrowing covertly, not caring to confess its violent fever, its stone-and-pickaxe madness. It had begun to issue what were called delegation bonds, really bills of exchange payable at a distant date, so that the contractors might be paid on the day the agreements were signed, and thus enabled to obtain money by discounting the bonds. The Crédit Viticole had graciously accepted this paper at the contractors' hands. One day when the

Municipality was in want of money, Saccard went and tempted it. It received a considerable advance on an issue of delegation bonds, which M. Toutin-Laroche swore he held from contracting companies, and which he dragged through every gutter of speculation. From thenceforward the Crédit Viticole was safe from attack; it held Paris by the throat. The director now talked only with a smile of the famous Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco; and yet it still continued to exist, and the newspapers continued regularly to extol its great commercial stations. One day when M. Toutin-Laroche endeavoured to induce Saccard to take shares in this society, the latter laughed in his face, and asked him if he thought he was such a fool as to invest his money in the Société Générale of the Arabian Nights.

Up to that time Saccard had speculated successfully, with safe profits, cheating, selling himself, making money on deals, deriving some sort of gain from each of his operations. Soon, however, this gambling in differences ceased to suffice him; he disdained to glean and pick up the gold which men like Toutin-Laroche and the Baron Gouraud let drop behind them. He plunged his arms into the sack to the elbows. He went into partnership with Mignon, Charrier and Co., those famous contractors, who were then just starting and who were destined to make colossal fortunes. The Municipality had already decided no longer to carry out the works itself, but to have the boulevards laid out by contract. The tendering companies agreed to deliver a complete thoroughfare, with its trees planted, it benches and lamp-posts fixed, in return for a specified indemnity; sometimes even they delivered the thoroughfare for nothing, finding themselves amply remunerated by retaining the bordering building-ground, for which they asked a considerably enhanced price. Saccard through his connections obtained a concession to lay out three lots of boulevards. He was the ardent and somewhat blundering soul of the partnership. The Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, his creatures at the outset, were a pair of fat, cunning cronies,

master-masons who knew the value of money. They laughed in their sleeves at Saccard's horses and carriages; oftenest they kept on their blouses, always ready to shake hands with their workmen, and returning home covered with plaster. They came from Langres both of them. They brought into this burning and insatiable Paris their Champenois caution, their calm brains, not very open to impressions, not very intelligent, but exceedingly quick at profiting by opportunities for filling their pockets, contented to enjoy themselves later on. If Saccard pushed the business, infused his vigour into it, and his rage for greed, the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, by their matter-of-fact ways, their methodical, narrow management, saved it a score of times from being capsized by the extraordinary imagination of their partner. They would never agree to having superb offices in a house which he wanted to build to astonish Paris. They refused moreover to entertain the subordinate speculations that sprouted each morning in his head: the erection of concert-halls and immense baths on the building-ground bordering their thoroughfares; of railways along the line of the new boulevards; of glass-roofed galleries which would increase the rent of the shops ten-fold, and allow Paris to walk about without getting wet. The contractors, in order to put a stop to these alarming projects, decided that these pieces of ground should be apportioned among the three partners, and that each of them should do as he please with his share. They wisely continued to sell theirs. Saccard built upon his. His brain seethed. He would have proposed in all seriousness to place Paris under an immense bell-glass, so as to transform it into a hot-house for forcing pine-apples and sugar-canes.

Before long, turning over money by the shovelful, he had eight houses on the new boulevards. He had four that were completely finished, two in the Rue de Marignan and two on the Boulevard Haussmann; the four others, situated on the Boulevard Malesherbes, remained in progress, and one of them, in fact, a vast enclosure of planks from which a magnificent house was to

arise, had not got further than the flooring of the first story. At this period his affairs became so complicated, he had so many strings attached to his fingers' ends, so many interests to watch over and puppets to work, that he slept barely three hours a night, and read his correspondence in his carriage. The marvellous part was that his coffers seemed inexhaustible. He held shares in every company, built houses with a sort of mania, turned to every trade and threatened to inundate Paris like a rising tide, and yet he was never seen to realize a genuine clear profit, to pocket a big sum of gold shining in the sun. This flood of gold with no known source, which seemed to flow from his office in rapidly-recurring waves, astonished the cockneys and made of him, at one moment, the prominent figure to whom the newspapers ascribed all the witticisms that came from the Bourse.

With such a husband Renée was as little married as she could be. She remained entire weeks almost without seeing him. For the rest he was perfect: he opened his cash-box quite wide for her. At bottom she liked him as she would have liked an obliging banker. When she visited the Hôtel Béraud, she praised him highly before her father, whose cold austerity was in no way changed by his son-in-law's good-fortune. Her contempt had disappeared; this man seemed so convinced that life is a mere business, he was so obviously born to coin money with whatever fell into his hands: women, children, paving-stones, sacks of plaster, consciences, that she was no longer able to reproach him for their marriage-bargain. Since that bargain he looked upon her in a measure as upon one of those fine houses which did him credit and which would, he hoped, yield him a large profit. He liked to see her well-dressed, noisy, attracting the attention of all Paris. That consolidated his position, doubled the probable figure of his fortune. He seemed handsome, young, amorous and giddy because of his wife. She was his partner, his unconscious accomplice. A new pair of horses, a two-thousand-crown dress, a surrender to some lover facilitated and often ensured the success of his most remunerative transactions. Also

he often pretended to be tired out and sent her to a minister, to some functionary or other, to solicit an authorization or receive a reply. He said to her: "And be good!" in a tone all his own, bantering and coaxing in one. And when she returned, successful, he rubbed his hands, repeating his famous, "I hope you were good!" Renée laughed. He was too active to desire a Madame Michelin. Only he loved coarse pleasantries and improper hypotheses. For the rest, had Renée not "been good," he would have experienced only the mortification of having really paid for the minister's or functionary's complaisance. To dupe people, to give them less than their money's worth, was his delight. He often said: "If I were a woman, I might sell myself, but I would never deliver the goods: that is too foolish."

This madcap of a Renée, who had shot one night into the Parisian firmament as the eccentric fairy of fashionable voluptuousness, was the most complex of women. Had she been brought up at home, she would doubtless by the aid of religion or some other nervous satisfaction have blunted the edge of the desire whose pricks at times maddened her. Her mind was of the middle-class: she was absolutely straightforward, loved logical views, feared Heaven and Hell, and was crammed with prejudice; she was the daughter of her father, of that placid, prudent race among which flourish the virtues of the fireside. And in this nature there sprouted and grew her prodigious fantasies, her ever reviving curiosity, her unspeakable longings. Among the ladies of the Visitation, free, her mind roaming amid the mystic voluptuousness of the chapel and the carnal attachments of her little friends, she had framed for herself a fantastic education, learning vice, throwing the frankness of her nature into it, and disordering her brain to the extent of singularly embarrassing her confessor by telling him that one day at mass she had experienced an irrational desire to get up and kiss him. Then she struck her breast, and turned pale at the thought of the Devil and his caldrons. The fault which later brought on her marriage with Saccard, the brutal rape which she underwent with a sort

of frightened expectation, made her despise herself, and accounted in a great measure for the subsequent abandonment of her whole life. She thought that she need no longer struggle against evil, that it was in her, that logic authorized her to pursue the study of wickedness to the end. She had still more curiosity than appetite. Thrown into the world of the Second Empire, abandoned to her imagination, kept in money, encouraged in her loudest eccentricities, she gave herself, then regretted it, and finally succeeded in killing her expiring good principles, for ever lashed, for ever pushed onwards by her insatiable desire for knowledge and sensation.

For the rest she had as yet turned only the first page of the book of vice. She was fond of talking in a low tone, and laughing, about the extraordinary cases of the tender friendship of Suzanne Haffner and Adeline d'Espanet, of the ticklish trade of Madame de Lauwerens, and of the Comtesse Vanska's tariffed kisses; but she still looked upon these things from afar, with the vague idea of tasting them, perhaps; and this indefinite longing that arose within her at evil hours still further increased her turbulent anxiety, her mad search after an unique, exquisite enjoyment of which she alone should partake. Her first lovers had not spoilt her; three times she had thought herself seized with a grand passion; love burst in her head like a cracker whose sparks failed to reach the heart. She went mad for a month, exhibiting herself with her heart's lord all over Paris; and then one morning, amid all the racket of her amorousness, she became conscious of a crushing silence, an immense void. The first, the young Duc de Rozan, was a feast of sunshine that led to nothing; Renée, who had noticed him for his gentleness and his excellent manner, found him absolutely shallow, colourless and tedious when they were alone together. Mr. Simpson, an attaché at the American Legation, who came next, all but beat her, and thanks to this remained with her for more than a year. Then she took up the Comte de Chibray, one of the Emperor's aides-de-camp, an absurdly vain, good-looking man who was beginning

to hang terribly on her hands when the Duchesse de Sternich took it into her head to become enamoured of him and to take him away from her; whereupon she wept for him and gave her friends to understand that her heart was bruised, and that she should never be in love again. And thus she drifted towards M. de Mussy, the most insignificant creature in the world, a young man who was making his way in diplomacy by leading cotillons with especial grace; she never knew exactly how she had come to give herself to him, and she kept him a long time, a prey to idleness, disgusted with the unknown that is explored in an hour, and deferring the trouble of a change until she met with some extraordinary adventure. At twenty-eight she was already horribly weary. Her boredom appeared to her all the more insupportable as her homely virtues took advantage of the hours when she was bored to complain and to disquiet her. She bolted her door, she had horrible headaches. And then, when she opened the door again, it was a flood of silk and lace that surged through it with a great noise, a luxurious, joyous being with no care nor blush upon her brow.

Yet she had had a romance amid the fashionable commonplace of her life. One day, when she had gone out on foot to see her father, who disliked the noise of carriages at his door, she perceived, as she was walking back in the twilight along the Quai Saint-Paul, that she was being followed by a young man. It was warm; and the daylight was waning with amorous gentleness. She, who was never followed except on horseback in the lanes of the Bois, thought the adventure piquant, she felt flattered by it as by a new and somewhat brutal form of homage, whose very coarseness appealed to her. Instead of returning home, she turned down the Rue du Temple, and walked her admirer along the boulevards. The man, however, grew bolder and became so persistent that Renée, a little dismayed, lost her head, followed the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, and took refuge in the shop of her husband's sister. The man came in after her. Mme. Sidonie smiled, seemed to understand, and left

them alone. And when Renée made as if to follow her, the stranger held her back, addressed her with respectful fervour, and won her forgiveness. He was a clerk, he was called Georges, and she never asked him his surname. She came twice to see him; she came in through the shop, and he by the Rue Papillon. This chance love affair, picked up and accepted in the street, was one of her keenest pleasures. She always thought of it with a certain shame, but with a singular smile of regret. Mme. Sidonie profited by the adventure in that she at last became the accomplice of her brother's second wife, a part to which she had been aspiring since the day of the wedding.

That poor Madame Sidonie had experienced a disappointment. While intriguing for the match she had expected to marry Renée a little herself, to make her one of her customers and derive a heap of profits from her. She judged women at a glance, as connoissuers judge horseflesh. And so her consternation was great when, after allowing the couple a month to settle down, she perceived Mme. de Lauwerens enthroned in the centre of the drawing-room, and realized that she was already too late. Mme. de Lauwerens, a fine woman of six-and-twenty, made a business of launching new arrivals. She came of a very old family, and was married to a man in the higher financial world, who had the bad taste to refuse to pay her tailor's and milliner's bills. The lady, a very intelligent person, made money and kept herself. She loathed men, she said, but she supplied all her friends with them; there was always a full array of customers in the apartment which she occupied in the Rue de Provence over her husband's offices. You always found a snack there. You met your friends there in an unpremeditated and charming fashion. There was no harm in a young girl's going to see her dear Mme. de Lauwerens, and if chance brought men there who were, at all events, respectful, and moved in the best set—so much the worse. The hostess was adorable in her long lace tea-gowns. Many a visitor would have chosen her in preference to her collection of blondes and brunettes. But rumour asserted that she

was absolutely good. The whole secret of the affair lay there. She kept up her high position in society, had all the men for her friends, retained her pride as a virtuous woman, and derived a secret enjoyment from bringing others down and profiting by their fall. When Mme. Sidonie had enlightened herself as to the mechanism of the new invention, she was thunderstruck. It was the classical school, the woman in the old black dress carrying love-letters at the bottom of her basket, brought face to face with the modern, the lady of quality, who sells her friends in her boudoir while sipping a cup of tea. The modern school triumphed. Mme. Lauwerens looked coldly upon the shabby attire of Mme. Sidonie, in whom she scented a rival. And it was she who provided Renée with her first bore, the young Duc de Rozan, whom the fair financier had found much difficulty in disposing of. The classical school did not win the day till later on, when Mme. Sidonie lent her entresol to her sister-in-law so that she might gratify her caprice for the stranger of the Quai Saint-Paul. She remained her confidante.

But one of Mme. Sidonie's faithful friends was Maxime. From his fifteenth year, he had been in the habit of prowling around at his aunt's, sniffing at the gloves that he found lying forgotten on the furniture. She who hated clear situations and never owned up to her little complacencies, ended by lending him the keys of her apartments on certain days, saying that she was going to stay in the country till the next day. Maxime talked of some friends whom he wanted to entertain, and whom he dared not ask to his father's house. It was in the entresol in the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière that he spent several nights with the poor girl who had to be sent to the country. Mme. Sidonie borrowed her nephew's money, and went into ecstasies before him, murmuring in her soft voice that he was "smooth and pink as a cherub."

Maxime meantime had grown. He was now a nice-looking, slender young man, who had retained the rosy cheeks and blue eyes of childhood. His curly hair completed that "girl look"

that so enchanted the ladies. He resembled poor Angèle with her soft expression and blonde paleness. But he was not even the equal of that indolent, shallow woman. The race of the Rougons became refined in him, grew delicate and vicious. Born of too young a mother, constituting a strange, jumbled, and, so to say, scattered mixture of his father's furious appetites and his mother's self-abandonment and weakness, he was a defective offspring in whom the parental shortcomings were fulfilled and aggravated. This family lived too fast; it was dying out already in the person of this frail creature, whose sex must have remained in suspense; he represented, not a greedy eagerness for gain and enjoyment like Saccard, but a mean nature devouring ready-made fortunes, a strange hermaphrodite making its entrance at the right moment in a society that was growing rotten. When Maxime rode in the Bois, pinched in at the waist like a woman, lightly dancing in the saddle, in which he was swayed by the canter of his horse, he was the god of that age, with his swelling haunches, his long, slender hands, his sickly, lascivious air, his correct elegance, and his comic-opera slang. He was twenty years old, and already there was nothing left to surprise or disgust him. He had certainly dreamt of the most unheard-of filth. Vice with him was not an abyss, as with certain old men, but a natural, external growth. It waved over his fair hair, smiled upon his lips, dressed him in his clothes. But his special characteristic was his eyes, two clear and smiling blue apertures, coquette's mirrors, behind which one perceived all the emptiness of the brain. Those harlot's eyes were never lowered: they roamed in quest of pleasure, a pleasure without fatigue, which one summons and receives.

The everlasting whirlwind that swept through the apartment in the Rue de Rivoli and made its doors slam to and fro blew stronger in the measure that Maxime grew up, that Saccard enlarged the sphere of his operations, and that Renée threw more fever into her search for an unknown joy. These three beings ended by leading an astonishing existence of liberty and folly.

It was the ripe and prodigious fruit of an epoch. The street invaded the apartment with its rumbling of carriages, its jostling of strangers, its license of language. The father, the step-mother and the step-son acted, talked and made themselves at home as though each of them had found himself leading a bachelor life alone. Three boon companions, three students sharing the same furnished room, could not have made use of that room with less reserve for the installation of their vices, their loves, their noisy, adolescent gaiety. They accepted one another with a hand-shake, never seeming to suspect the reasons that united them under one roof, treating each other cavalierly, joyously, and thus assuming each the most entire independence. The family idea was replaced with them by a sort of partnership whose profits are divided in equal shares; each one drew his part of the pleasure to himself, and it was tacitly agreed that each should dispose of that part as best seemed to him. They went so far as to take their enjoyment in each other's presence, displaying it, describing it, without awakening any feeling but a little envy and curiosity.

Maxime now instructed Renée. When he went to the Bois with her, he told her stories about the fast women which entertained her vastly. A new woman could not appear by the lake, but he would lay himself out to ascertain the name of her lover, the allowance he made her, the style in which she lived. He knew these ladies' homes, and was acquainted with intimate details; he was a real living catalogue in which all the prostitutes in Paris were numbered, with a very complete description of each of them. This gazette of scandal was Renée's delight. On race-days, at Longchamps, when she drove by in her calash, she listened eagerly, albeit retaining the haughtiness of a woman of the real world, to how Blanche Muller deceived her attaché with a hair-dresser; or how the little baron had found the count in his drawers in the alcove of a skinny red-haired celebrity who was nicknamed the Crayfish. Each day brought its tittle-tattle. When the story was rather too warm, Maxime lowered his voice, but told it to the end. Renée opened wide her eyes,

like a child to whom a funny trick is being told, restrained her laughter, and then stifled it in her embroidered handkerchief, which she pressed daintily upon her lips.

Maxime also brought these ladies' photographs. He had actresses' photographs in all his pockets, and even in his cigar-case. From time to time he cleared them out and placed these ladies in the album that lay about on the furniture in the drawing-room, and that already contained the photographs of Renée's friends. There were men's photographs there too, MM. de Rozan, Simpson, de Chibray, de Mussy, as well as actors, writers, deputies, who had come to swell the collection nobody knew how. A strangely mixed society, a symbol of the jumble of persons and ideas that crossed Renée's and Maxime's lives. Whenever it rained or they felt bored, this album was the great subject of conversation. It always ended by falling under one's hand. Renée opened it with a yawn, for the hundredth time perhaps. Then her curiosity would reawaken, and the young man came and leant behind her. And then followed long discussions about the Crayfish's hair, Madame de Meinhold's double chin, Madame de Lauwerens' eyes, and Blanche Muller's bust; about the marquise's nose, which was a little on one side, and little Sylvia's mouth, which was renowned for the thickness of its lips. They compared the women with one another.

"If I were a man," said Renée, "I would choose Adeline."

"That's because you don't know Sylvia," replied Maxime. "She is so quaint! . . . I must say I prefer Sylvia."

The pages were turned over; sometimes the Duc de Rozan appeared, or Mr. Simpson, or the Comte de Chibray, and he added, jeering at her:

"Besides, your taste is perverted, everybody knows that. . . . Can anything more stupid be imagined than the faces of those men! Rozan and Chibray are both like Gustave, my hairdresser."

Renée shrugged her shoulders, as if to say that she was beyond the reach of sarcasm. She again forgot herself in the contempla-

tion of the pallid, smiling, or cross-grained faces contained in the album; she lingered longest over the portraits of the fast women, studying with curiosity the exact microscopic details of the photographs, the minute wrinkles, the tiny hairs. One day even she sent for a strong magnifying-glass, fancying she had perceived a hair on the Crayfish's nose. And in fact the glass did reveal a thin golden thread which had strayed from the eyebrows down to the middle of the nose. This hair diverted them, for a long time. For a week long the ladies who called were made to assure themselves in person of the presence of this hair. Thenceforward the magnifying-glass served to pick the women's faces to pieces. Renée made astonishing discoveries: she found unknown wrinkles, coarse skins, cavities imperfectly filled up with rice powder, until Maxime finally hid the glass, declaring that it was not right to disgust one's self like that with the human countenance. The truth was that she scrutinized too rigorously the thick lips of Sylvia, for whom he cherished a particular fondness. They invented a new game. They asked this question: "With whom would I like to spend a night?" and they opened the album which was to supply for the answer. This brought about some very joyous couplings. The friends played this game for several evenings. Renée was in this way married successively to the Archbishop of Paris, to the Baron Gouraud, to M. de Chibray, which caused much laughter, and to her husband himself, which distressed her mightily. As to Maxime, either by chance, or through the mischievousness of Renée, who opened the album, he always fell to the marquise. But they never laughed so much as when fate coupled two men or two women together.

The familiarity between Renée and Maxime went so far that she told him the sorrows of her heart. He consoled and advised her. His father did not seem to exist. Then they came to confide in one another about their childhood. It was especially during their drives in the Bois that they felt a vague languor, a longing to tell one another things that are difficult to say, that

are never told. The delight that children take in whispering about forbidden things, the fascination that exists for a young man and a young woman in lowering themselves to sin, if only in words, brought them back unceasingly to suggestive topics. They there partook deeply of a voluptuousness in which they felt no self-reproaching, and in which they revelled, lazily reclining in the two corners of the carriage like two old schoolfellows recalling their first escapades. They ended by becoming braggarts of immorality. Renée confessed that the little girls at the boarding-school were very smutty. Maxime went further and had the courage to relate some of the infamy of the college at Plassans.

"Ah! I can't tell you," murmured Renée.

Then she bent towards his ear as if the sound of her voice alone would have made her blush, and she confided to him one of those convent stories that are spun out in lewd songs. He had too rich a collection of similar anecdotes to be left behindhand. He hummed some very bawdy couplets in her ear. And little by little they entered upon a peculiar state of beatitude, rocked by the carnal ideas they stirred up, tickled by little undefined desires. The carriage rolled gently on, and they returned home deliciously fatigued, more exhausted than on the morning after a night of love. They had sinned like two young men who, wandering down country lanes without mistresses, content themselves with an interchange of reminiscences.

A still greater familiarity and license existed between father and son. Saccard had realized that a great financier must love women and commit extravagances for them. He was a rough lover, and preferred money; but it formed part of his programme to frequent alcoves, to scatter bank-notes on certain mantelpieces, and from time to time to affix some noted strumpet as a sign-board to his speculations. When Maxime had left school they used to meet in the same women's rooms and laugh over it. They were even rivals in a measure. Occasionally when the young man was dining at the "Maison d'Or" with some

boisterous crew he heard Saccard's voice in an adjacent private room.

"I say! papa's next door!" he cried, with the grimace which he borrowed from the popular actors.

He went and knocked at the door of the private room, curious to see his father's conquest.

"Ah! it's you," said the latter, jovially. "Come in. You make so much noise that a man can't hear himself eat. Who are you with?"

"Why, there's Laure d'Aurigny, and Sylvia, and the Crayfish, and two more besides, I believe. They are wonderful: they dig their fingers into the dishes, and chuck handfuls of salad at our heads. My coat is covered with oil."

The father laughed, thinking this very amusing.

"Ah! young folk, young folk," he murmured. "That's not like us, is it, pet? We've had a nice quiet dinner, and now we're going to by-by."

And he took the woman by his side by the chin, and cooed with his Provençal snuffle, producing a queer sort of love music.

"Oh! the old cully!" . . . cried the woman. "How are you, Maxime? Musn't I be fond of you, eh! to consent to sup with your scapegrace of a father. . . . I never see you now. Come the day after to-morrow, in the morning, early. . . . No, really, I have something to tell you."

Saccard finished an ice or a fruit, taking small mouthfuls, blissfully. He kissed the woman on the shoulder, saying jestingly:

"You know, my loves, if I'm in the way I'll go out. . . . You can ring when I may come in again."

Then he carried the lady off, or sometimes went with her and joined in the noise of the next room. Maxime and he shared the same shoulders; their hands met around the same waists. They called to one another on the sofas, and repeated to one another aloud the confidences the women had whispered in their ears. And they carried their intimacy to the pitch of

plotting together to carry off from the company the blonde or the brunette whom one of them had selected.

They were well known at Mabille. They went there arm in arm, after a good dinner, strolling round the garden, nodding to the women, tossing them a remark as they went by. They laughed out loud, without unlocking their arms, and came to one another's aid if necessary whenever the conversation became too lively. The father, who was very strong on this point, negotiated his son's love-affairs advantageously. At times they sat down and drank with a party of girls. Then they changed their table, or resumed their stroll. And till midnight they were seen, their arms always linked in their intimacy, following the petticoats along the yellow pathways, under the glaring flame of the gas-jets.

When they returned home they brought with them from outside, in their coats, a something of the women they had been with. Their jaunty attitudes, the tags of certain suggestive phrases and certain vulgar gestures filled the flat in the Rue de Rivoli with the fragrance of an equivocal alcove. The easy, wanton way in which the father shook hands with his son was enough to proclaim whence they came. It was in this atmosphere that Renée inhaled her sensual caprices and longings. She chaffed them nervously.

"Where on earth do you come from?" she asked them. "You smell of musk and tobacco. . . . I know I shall have a headache."

And the strange aroma did in fact perturb her profoundly. It was the persistent perfume of that singular household.

Meantime Maxime was smitten with a violent passion for little Sylvia. He bored his step-mother with this girl for several months. Renée soon knew her from one end to the other, from the sole of her feet to the crown of her head. She had a blue mark on her hip; nothing was sweeter than her knees; her shoulders had this peculiarity that the left alone was dimpled. Maxime took a malicious pleasure in filling their drives with his

mistress's perfections. One evening, on returning from the Bois, Renée's carriage and Sylvia's, caught in a block, had to draw up side by side in the Champs-Élysées. The two women eyed one another with keen curiosity, while Maxime, enchanted with this critical situation, tittered under his breath. When the calash began to roll on again, his step-mother preserved a gloomy silence; he thought she was sulking, and expected one of those maternal scenes, one of those strange lectures, with which she still occasionally filled up her moments of lassitude.

"Do you know that person's jewellers?" she asked him suddenly, at the moment they reached the Place de la Concorde.

"Yes, alas!" he replied with a smile; "I owe him ten thousand francs. . . . Why do you ask me?"

"For nothing."

Then, after a fresh pause:

"She had a very pretty bracelet, the one on the left wrist. . . . I should have liked to see it closer."

They reached home. She said no more on the matter. Only, the next day, just as Maxime and his father were going out together, she took the young man aside and spoke to him in an undertone, with an air of embarrassment, and a pretty smile which pleaded for pardon. He seemed surprised and went off, laughing his wicked laugh. In the evening he brought Sylvia's bracelet, which his step-mother had begged him to show her.

"There's what you want," he said. "One would turn thief for your sake, step-mother."

"She didn't see you take it?" asked Renée, who was greedily examining the bracelet.

"I don't think so. . . . She wore it yesterday, she certainly would not want to wear it to-day."

Meantime Renée approached the window. She put on the bracelet. She raised her wrist a little and turned it round, enraptured, repeating:

"Oh! very pretty, very pretty. . . . I like everything immensely, except the emeralds."

At that moment Saccard entered, and as she was still holding up her wrist in the white light of the window:

"Hullo!" he cried in astonishment. "Sylvia's bracelet!"

"Do you know this piece of jewellery?" she said, more embarrassed than he, not knowing what to do with her arm.

He had recovered himself, and threatened his son with his finger, murmuring:

"That rascal has always some forbidden fruit in his pockets. . . . One of these days he will bring us the lady's arm with the bracelet on."

"Ah! but it's not I," replied Maxime with mischievous cowardice. "It's Renée who wanted to see it."

"Ah!" was all the husband said.

And he examined the gaud in his turn, repeating like his wife:

"It is very pretty, very pretty."

Then he went quietly away, and Renée scolded Maxime for giving her away like that. But he declared that his father didn't care a pin! Then she returned him the bracelet, adding:

"You must go to the jeweller and order one exactly like it for me; only you must have sapphires put in instead of emeralds."

Saccard was unable to keep a thing or a person near him for long without wanting to sell it or derive some sort of profit from it. His son was not twenty when he thought of turning him to account. A good-looking boy, nephew to a minister and son of a big financier, ought to be a good investment. He was a trifle young still, but one could always look out for a wife and a dowry for him, and then decide to postpone the wedding for a long time, or to hurry it on, according to the exigencies of domestic economy. Saccard was fortunate. He discovered on a board of directors of which he was a member a fine, tall man, M. de Mareuil, who in two days belonged to him. M. de Mareuil was a retired sugar-refiner of Havre, and his real name was Bonnet. After amassing a large fortune, he had married a young girl of noble birth, also very rich, who was looking out for a fool

of imposing appearance. Bonnet obtained permission to assume his wife's name, which was a first satisfaction for his bride; but his marriage had made him madly ambitious, and his dream was to repay Hélène for the noble name she had given him by achieving a high political position. From that time forward he had put money into new papers, bought large estates in the heart of the Nièvre, and by all the well-known means prepared for himself a candidature for the Corps Législatif. So far he had failed without losing an iota of his solemnity. His was the most incredibly empty brain one could come across. He was of splendid stature, with the white, pensive face of a great statesman; and as he had a marvellous way of listening, he gave the impression of a prodigious inner labour of comprehension and deduction. In reality he was thinking of nothing. But he succeeded in perplexing people, who no longer knew whether they had to do with a man of distinction or a fool. M. de Mareuil attached himself to Saccard as to a raft. He knew that an official candidature was about to fall vacant in the Nièvre, and he ardently hoped that the minister would nominate him: it was his last card. And so he handed himself over, bound hand and foot, to the minister's brother. Saccard, who scented a good piece of business, put into his head a match between his daughter Louise and Maxime. The other became most effusive, thought he was the first to have had the idea of this marriage, and considered himself very fortunate to enter into a minister's family and to give Louise to a young man who seemed to have such fine prospects.

Louise, her father said, would have a million francs to her dowry. Deformed, ugly, and adorable, she was doomed to die young; consumption was stealthily undermining her, giving her a nervous gaiety and a tender grace. Sick little girls quickly grow old, and become women before their time. She was naïvely sensual, she seemed to have been born when she was fifteen, in full puberty. When her father, that healthy, stupid colossus, looked at her, he could not believe that she was his daughter.

Her mother during her lifetime had also been a tall, strong woman; but stories were told about her which explained the child's stuntedness, her manners like a millionaire gipsy's, her vicious and charming ugliness. It was said that Hélène de Mareuil had died amid the most shameful debauchery. Pleasure had eaten into her like an ulcer, without her husband's perceiving the lucid madness of his wife, whom he ought to have had locked up in a lunatic asylum. Borne in these diseased flanks, Louise had issued from them with impoverished blood, deformed limbs, her brain threatened, and her memory already filled with a dirty life. She occasionally fancied she had a confused recollection of a former existence; she saw unfolded before her, in a vague gloaming, bizarre scenes, men and women kissing, a whole fleshly drama in which her childish curiosity found amusement. It was her mother that spoke within her. This vice continued through her childhood. As she gradually grew up, nothing astonished her, she recollected everything, or rather she knew everything, and she reached for forbidden things with a sureness of hand that made her, in life, resemble a man returning home after a long absence, and having only to stretch out his arm to make himself comfortable and enjoy the pleasures of his homestead. This odd little girl, who by her evil instincts flattered Maxime, but had, moreover, in this second life which she lived as a virgin with all the knowledge and shame of a grown woman, an ingenuous effrontery, a piquant mixture of childishness and audacity, was bound in the end to attract him, and to seem to him even more diverting than Sylvia, the daughter of a worthy stationer, who had the heart of a money-lender, and was terribly homely by nature.

The marriage was arranged with a laugh, and it was decided that "the youngsters" should be allowed to grow up. The two families lived in close intimacy. M. de Mareuil worked his candidature. Saccard watched his prey. It was understood that Maxime should place his nomination as an auditor to the Council of State among the wedding-presents.

Meanwhile the fortune of the Saccards seemed to be at its zenith. It blazed in the midst of Paris like a colossal bonfire. This was the moment when the eager division of the hounds' fee filled a corner of the forest with the yelping of the pack, the cracking of whips, the flaring of torches. The appetites let loose were satisfied at last, in the shamelessness of triumph, amid the sound of crumbling districts and of fortunes built up in six months. The town was become a sheer orgy of gold and women. Vice, coming from on high, flowed through the gutters, spread out over the ornamental waters, shot up in the fountains of the public gardens to fall down again upon the roofs in a fine, penetrating rain. And at night-time, when one crossed the bridges, it seemed as though the Seine drew along with it, through the sleeping city, the refuse of the town, crumbs fallen from the tables, bows of lace left on couches, false hair forgotten in cabs, banknotes slipped out of bodices, all that the brutality of desire and the immediate satisfaction of an instinct fling into the street bruised and sullied. Then, amid the feverish sleep of Paris, and even better than during its breathless quest in broad daylight, one felt the unsettling of the brain, the golden and voluptuous nightmare of a city madly enamoured of its gold and its flesh. The violins sounded till midnight; then the windows became dark, and shadows descended upon the city. It was like a colossal alcove in which the last candle had been blown out, the last remnant of shame extinguished. There was nothing left in the depths of the darkness save a great rattle of furious and wearied love; while the Tuileries, at the water-side, stretched out their arms into the night, as though for a huge embrace.

Saccard had just built his mansion in the Parc Monceau, on a plot of ground stolen from the Municipality. He had reserved for himself, on the first floor, a magnificent study, in violet ebony and gold, with tall glass doors to the book-cases, full of business-papers, but without a book to be seen; the safe, embedded in the wall, yawned like an iron alcove, large enough

to accommodate the amorous exploits of a milliard of money. Here his fortune bloomed and insolently displayed itself. Everything seemed to succeed with him. When he left the Rue de Rivoli, enlarging his household, doubling his expenses, he talked to his friends of considerable winnings. According to his account, his partnership with the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier brought him in enormous profits; his speculations in house-property came off still better; while the Crédit Viticole was an inexhaustible milch-cow. He had a way of enumerating his riches that bewildered his listeners and prevented them from seeing the truth. His Provençal snuffle grew more pronounced: with his short phrases and nervous gestures he let off fireworks in which millions shot up like rockets and ended by dazzling the most incredulous. This turbulent mimicry of the man of wealth was mainly responsible for the reputation he had achieved as a lucky speculator. To tell the truth, no one knew him to be possessed of a clear, solid capital. His various partners, who were necessarily acquainted with his position as regarded themselves, explained his colossal fortune by believing in his absolute luck in other speculations, those in which they had no share. He spent money madly; the flow from his cash-box continued, although the sources of that stream of gold had not yet been discovered. It was pure folly, a frenzy of money, handfuls of louis flung out of window, the safe emptied each evening to its last sou, filling again during the night, no one knew how, and never supplying such large sums as when Saccard pretended to have lost the keys.

In this fortune, which clamoured and overflowed like a winter torrent, Renée's dowry was shaken, carried off and drowned. The young wife, who had been distrustful in the earlier days and desirous of managing her property herself, soon grew weary of business; and then she felt herself poor beside her husband and, crushed by debt, she was obliged to apply to him, to borrow money from him and place herself in his hands. At each fresh bill that he paid, with the smile of a man indulgent towards

human foibles, she surrendered herself a little more, confiding dividend-warrants to him, authorizing him to sell this or that. When they went to live in the house in the Parc Monceau, already she found herself almost entirely stripped. He had taken the place of the State, and paid her the interest on the hundred thousand francs coming from the Rue de la Pépinière; on the other hand, he had made her sell the Sologne property in order to sink the proceeds in a great piece of business, a splendid investment, he said. She therefore had nothing left except the Charonne building-plots, which she obstinately refused to part with, so as not to sadden that excellent Aunt Elisabeth. And in that quarter again he was preparing a stroke of genius, with the help of his old accomplice, Larsonneau. For the rest, she remained his debtor; though he had taken her fortune, he paid her the income five or six times over. The interest of the hundred thousand francs, added to the revenue of the Sologne money, amounted to barely nine or ten thousand francs, just enough to pay her hosier and boot-maker. He gave her, or spent on her, fifteen or twenty times that paltry sum. He would have worked for a week to rob her of a hundred francs, and he kept her like a queen. And thus, like all the world, she respected her husband's monumental safe, without trying to penetrate into the nothingness of that stream of gold flowing under her eyes, into which every morning she flung herself.

At the Parc Monceau it was a delirium, a lightning triumph. The Saccards doubled the number of their carriages and horses; they had an army of servants whom they dressed in a dark-blue livery with drab breeches and yellow-and-black striped waistcoats, a rather severe scheme of colour which the financier had chosen so as to appear quite serious, one of his most cherished dreams. They emblazoned their luxury on the walls, and drew back the curtains when they gave big dinners. The whirlwind of contemporary life, which had set slamming the doors of the first-floor in the Rue de Rivoli, had become, in the mansion, a genuine hurricane which threatened to carry away the partitions.

In the midst of these princely rooms, along the gilded balustrades, over the fine velvet carpets, in this fairy parvenu palace, there trailed the aroma of Mabille, there danced the jauntiness of the popular quadrilles, the whole period passed with its mad, stupid laugh, its eternal hunger and its eternal thirst. It was the disorderly house of fashionable pleasure, of the unblushing pleasure that widens the windows so that the passers-by may enjoy the confidence of the alcoves. Husband and wife lived there freely, under their servants' eyes. They divided the house into two, encamped there, not appearing as though at home, but rather as if they had been dropped, at the end of a tumultuous and bewildering journey, into some palatial hotel where they had merely taken the time to undo their trunks in order to hasten more speedily towards the delights of a fresh city. They slept there at night, only staying at home on the days of the great dinner-parties, carried away by a ceaseless rush across Paris, returning sometimes for an hour as one returns to a room at an inn between two excursions. Renée felt more restless, more nervous there; her silken skirts glided with adder-like hisses over the thick carpets, along the satin of the couches; she was irritated by the idiotic gilding that surrounded her, by the high, empty ceilings, where after fête-nights there lingered nothing but the laughter of young fools and the sententious maxims of old ruffians; and to fill this luxury, to dwell amid this radiancy, she longed for a supreme amusement which her curiosity in vain sought in all the corners of the house, in the little sun-coloured drawing-room, in the conservatory with its fat vegetation. As to Saccard, he was approaching the realization of his dream; he received the high financiers, M. Toutin-Laroche, M. de Lauwerens; he received also great politicians, the Baron Gouraud, Haffner the deputy; his brother the minister had even consented to come two or three times and consolidate his position by his presence. And yet, like his wife, he experienced nervous anxieties, a restlessness that lent to his laugh a strange sound of broken window-panes. He became so giddy, so bewildered, that his acquaintances

said of him: "That devil of a Saccard! he makes too much money, it will drive him mad!" In 1860 he had been decorated, in consequence of a mysterious service he had done the préfet, by lending his name to a lady for the sale of some land.

It was about the time of their installation in the Parc Monceau that an apparition crossed Renée's life, leaving an ineffaceable impression. Up to then the minister had resisted the entreaties of his sister-in-law, who was dying of a longing to be invited to the court balls. He gave way at last, thinking his brother's fortune to be definitely established. Renée did not sleep for a month. The great evening came, and she sat all trembling in the carriage that drove her to the Tuileries.

She wore a costume of prodigious grace and originality, a real gem, which she had hit upon one sleepless night, and which three of Worms's workmen had come to her house to carry out under her eyes. It was a simple dress of white gauze, but trimmed with a multitude of little flounces, scalloped out and edged with black velvet. The black velvet tunic was cut out square, very low over her bosom, which was framed with narrow lace, barely a finger deep. Not a flower, not a bit of ribbon; at her wrists, bracelets without any chasing, and on her head a narrow diadem of gold, a plain circlet which clothed her as with a halo.

When she had reached the reception-rooms, and her husband had left her for the Baron Gouraud, she experienced a momentary embarrassment. But the mirrors, in which she saw that she was adorable, quickly reassured her, and she was accustoming herself to the hot air and the murmur of voices, to the crowd of dress-coats and white shoulders, when the Emperor appeared. He slowly crossed the room on the arm of a short, fat general, who puffed as though he suffered from a troublesome digestion. The shoulders drew up in two lines, while the dress-coats fell back a step with instinctive discretion. Renée found herself pushed to the end of the line of shoulders, near the second door, the one which the Emperor was approaching with a painful and

faltering step. She thus saw him come towards her, from one door to the other.

He was in plain dress, with the red riband of the Grand Cordon. Renée, again seized with emotion, saw badly, and to her this bleeding stain seemed to splash the whole of the sovereign's breast. She considered him little, with legs too short, and swaying loins; but now she was charmed, and he looked handsome to her, with his wan face and the heavy, leaden lids that fell over his lifeless eyes. Under his moustache his mouth feebly opened, and his nose alone stood out cartilaginous amid the puffiness of his face.

Worn out, vaguely smiling, the Emperor and the old general kept advancing with short steps, apparently supporting one another. They looked at the bowing ladies, and their glances, cast to right and left, glided into the bodices. The general leant on one side, spoke a word to his master, and pressed his arm with the air of a jolly companion. And the Emperor, nerveless and nebulous, duller even than usual, came nearer and nearer with his dragging step.

They were in the middle of the room when Renée felt their glances fixed upon her. The general examined her with a look of surprise, while the Emperor, half-raising his eyelids, had a red light in the gray hesitation of his bleared eyes. Renée, losing countenance, lowered her head, bowed, saw nothing more save the pattern of the carpet. But she followed their shadows, and understood that they were pausing for a few seconds before her. And she thought she heard the Emperor, that ambiguous dreamer, murmur as he gazed at her, immersed in her muslin skirt striped with velvet:

"Look, general, there's a flower worth picking, a mystic carnation, variegated white and black."

And the general replied, in a more brutal voice:

"Sire, that carnation would look devilish well in our buttonholes."

Renée raised her head. The vision had disappeared, the crowd

was thronging round the doorway. After that evening, she frequently returned to the Tuileries: she even had the honour of being complimented aloud by His Majesty, and of becoming a little his friend; but she always remembered the sovereign's slow heavy walk across the room between the two rows of shoulders; and whenever she experienced any new joy amid her husband's growing prosperity, she again saw the Emperor over-topping the bowing bosoms, coming towards her, comparing her to a carnation which the old general advised him to put in his buttonhole. To her this was the shrill note of her life.

CHAPTER IV

The distinct and exquisite longing that had risen to Renée's heart, amid the perturbing perfumes of the conservatory, while Maxime and Louise sat laughing on a sofa in the little buttercup drawing-room, seemed to vanish like a nightmare that leaves behind it nothing but a vague shudder. All through the night, Renée had the bitter taste of the tanghin-plant on her lips; it seemed to her, when she felt the burning of the malignant leaf, as if a mouth of flame were pressing itself to hers, breathing into her a devouring love. Then this mouth escaped her, and her dream was drowned in the vast waves of shadow that rolled over her.

In the morning she slept a little. When she awoke, she fancied herself ill. She had the curtains drawn, spoke to her doctor of sickness and headache, and for two days positively refused to go out. And as she pretended that she was being besieged, she forbade her door. Maxime came and knocked at it in vain. He did not sleep in the house, preferring to be free to do as he pleased in his rooms; and in fact he led the most nomadic life in the world, living in his father's new houses, selecting the floor that pleased him, moving every month, often from caprice, sometimes to make room for serious tenants. He dried the walls in the company of some mistress. Accustomed to his stepmother's caprices, he feigned great sympathy, and went upstairs to enquire after her with a distressed look, four times a day, solely to tease her. On the third day he found her in the little drawing-room, pink and smiling, looking calm and reposed.

"Well! have you had a good time with Céleste?" he asked, alluding to her long tête-à-tête with her maid.

"Yes," she replied, "she is a priceless girl. Her hands are

always cold; she used to lay them on my forehead and soothe my poor head a little."

"But that girl's a nostrum!" cried Maxime. "If ever I have the misfortune to fall in love, you'll lend her to me, won't you? to lay her two hands on my heart."

They jested, they went for their usual drive in the Bois. A fortnight passed. Renée had thrown herself more madly into her life of visits and balls; her head seemed to have turned once more, she complained no longer of lassitude and disgust. One might only have suspected that she had committed some secret fault which she kept to herself, but which she betrayed by a more strongly marked contempt for herself and by a more reckless depravity in her fashionable caprices. One night she confessed to Maxime that she was dying to go to a ball which Blanche Muller, a popular actress, was giving to the princesses of the foot-lights and the queens of the fast world. This avowal surprised and embarrassed even Maxime, who, after all, had no great scruples. He tried to catechize his step-mother: really, that was no place for her; besides, she would see nothing very amusing there; and then, if she were recognized, what a scandal there would be. To all these good arguments she answered with clasped hands, smiling and entreating:

"Come, my little Maxime, be nice, I want to go. . . . I'll put on a very dark domino, and we'll only just walk through the rooms."

Maxime always ended by giving way, and would have taken his step-mother to every brothel in Paris for the asking. When he consented to escort her to Blanche Muller's ball, she clapped her hands like a child that is given an unexpected holiday.

"Ah! you're a dear," she said. "It's to-morrow, is it not? Come and fetch me very early. I want to see the women arrive. You must tell me their names, and we'll have great fun."

She reflected, and then added:

"No, don't come here. Wait for me in a cab on the Boulevard Malesherbes. I shall go out through the garden."

This mysteriousness was an added spice to her escapade, a simple refinement of pleasure, for she might have gone out at midnight by the front-door without her husband's so much as putting his head out of window.

The next day, after telling Céleste to sit up for her, she crossed the dark shadows of the Parc Monceau with exquisite timorous shivers. Saccard had taken advantage of his good understanding with the Hôtel de Ville to have a key given him of a little gate in the gardens, and Renée had asked for one for herself as well. She almost lost her way, and only found the cab thanks to the two yellow eyes of the lamps. At this period the Boulevard Malesherbes, barely finished, was still perfectly lonely at night-time. Renée glided into the vehicle in great emotion, her heart beating rapturously, as though she were going to an assignation. Maxime smoked philosophically, half asleep in a corner of the cab. He wanted to throw away his cigar, but she prevented him, and in trying to hold back his arm in the darkness she put her hand full in his face, which amused them both greatly.

"I tell you I like the smell of tobacco," she cried. "Go on smoking. . . . Besides, we are having a debauch to-night. . . . I'm a man, see?"

The boulevard was not yet lighted up. While the cab drove down to the Madeleine it was so dark inside that they could not see one another. Now and again, when the young man lifted his cigar to his lips, a red spot pierced the thick darkness. This red spot interested Renée. Maxime, who was half-covered by the folds of the black satin domino that filled the inside of the cab, continued smoking in silence, with an expression of weariness. The truth was that his stepmother's caprice had prevented him from following a party of women who had made up their minds to begin and end Blanche Muller's ball at the Café Anglais. He was in a huff, and she felt conscious of his sulkiness in the darkness.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"No, I'm cold," he replied.

"Dear me! I'm burning. I think it's stifling in here. . . . Take the end of my skirts over your knees."

"Oh! your skirts," he muttered, ill-humouredly. "I'm up to my eyes in your skirts."

But this remark made him laugh himself, and little by little he grew livelier. She told him how frightened she had felt in the Parc Monceau. After that she confessed to him another of her longings: she should like one night to go for a row on the little lake of the gardens in the skiff that she could see from her windows, moored at the edge of a pathway. He thought she was growing sentimental. The cab rolled on, the darkness remained impenetrable, they leant towards one another so as to hear one another amid the noise of the wheels, touching each other when they moved their hands, and at times, when they approached too closely, inhaling one another's warm breath. And at regular intervals, Maxime's cigar glowed afresh, throwing a red blur in the darkness, and casting a pale pink flash over Renée's face. She was adorable, seen by this fleeting light; so much so that the young man was struck by it.

"Oh oh!" he said. "We seem to be very pretty this evening, stepmamma. . . . Let's have a look."

He brought his cigar nearer, and drew a few rapid puffs. Renée in her corner was lit up with a warm, palpitating light. She had slightly raised her hood. Her bare head, covered with a mass of little curls, adorned with a simple blue ribbon, looked like a real boy's head over the great black satin blouse which came up to her neck. She thought it very amusing to be thus examined and admired by the light of a cigar. She threw herself back tittering, while he added with an air of comical gravity:

"The deuce! I shall have to look after you, if I am to bring you back safe and sound to my father."

Meantime the cab turned round the Madeleine and joined the current of the boulevards. Here it became filled with a leaping light, with the reflections from the shops with their flaring win-

dows. Blanche Muller lived close by in one of the new houses that have been built on the raised ground of the Rue Basse-du-Rempart. There were but few carriages as yet at the door. It was only ten o'clock. Maxime wanted to drive down the boulevards and wait an hour; but Renée, whose curiosity was becoming keener, told him decidedly that she would go up all alone if he did not accompany her. He followed her, and was glad to find more people upstairs than he expected. Renée had put on her mask. Leaning on Maxime's arm, and whispering to him peremptory commands which he submissively obeyed, she ferreted about in all the rooms, lifted the corners of the door-hangings, examined the furniture, and would have gone so far as to search the drawers had she not feared being seen.

The apartment, though richly decorated, had Bohemian corners that at once suggested the chorus-girl. It was here especially that Renée's pink nostrils quivered, and that she constrained her companion to walk slowly, so as to lose no particle of things or of their smell. She lingered particularly in a dressing-room left wide open by Blanche Muller, who, when she received her friends, gave up everything to them, even to her alcove, where the bed was pushed aside to make room for the card-tables. But the dressing-room did not please her: it seemed to her common, and even a little dirty, with its carpet covered with little round burns from cigarette-ends, and its blue silk hangings stained with pomade and splashed with soap-suds. Then, when she had fully inspected the rooms, and fixed the smallest details of the place in her memory, so as to describe them later to her friends, she passed on to the guests. The men she knew; for the most part they were the same financiers, the same politicians, the same young men-about-town who came to her Thursdays. She fancied herself in her own drawing-room at times, when she came face to face with a group of smiling dress-coats, who, the previous evening, had worn the same smile in her house when talking to the Marquise d'Espanet or the fair-haired Mme. Haffner. Nor was the illusion completely dispelled when she looked at the women.

Laure d'Aurigny was in yellow like Suzanne Haffner, and Blanche Muller, like Adeline d'Espanet, wore a white dress which left her bare down to the middle of her back. At last Maxime besought her to take pity on him, and she consented to sit down with him on a sofa. They stayed there a moment, the young man yawning, Renée asking him the ladies' names, undressing them with her look, adding up the number of yards of lace they wore round their skirts. Seeing her absorbed in this serious study, he ended by slipping away in obedience to a sign which Laure d'Aurigny made him with her hand. She chaffed him about the lady he was escorting. Then she made him swear to come and join them at the Café Anglais at one o'clock.

"Your father will be there," she called to him, as he rejoined Renée.

The latter found herself surrounded by a group of women laughing very loud, while M. de Saffré had availed himself of the seat left vacant by Maxime to slip down beside her and pay her unmannerly compliments. Next, M. de Saffré and the women had all begun to shout, to smack their thighs, so much so that Renée, fairly deafened, and yawning in her turn, rose and said to her companion:

"Let's go away, they're too stupid!"

As they were leaving, M. de Mussy entered. He seemed delighted to meet Maxime, and paying no attention to the masked woman he had with him:

"Ah, my friend," he murmured with a love-sick air, "she will be the death of me. I know she is better, and she still forbids me her door. Do tell her you have seen me with tears in my eyes."

"Be still, she shall have your message," said the young man, with a curious laugh.

And on the stairs:

"Well, stepmamma, hasn't the poor fellow touched you?"

She shrugged her shoulders without replying. Outside, on the pavement, she paused before getting into the cab, which had

waited for them, and looked hesitatingly towards the Madeleine and towards the Boulevard des Italiens. It was barely half-past eleven, the boulevard was still very animated.

"So we are going home," she murmured, regretfully.

"Unless you care to take a drive along the boulevards," replied Maxime.

She agreed. Her feast of feminine curiosity was turning out badly, and she hated the idea of returning home with an illusion the less and an incipient headache. She had long imagined that an actresses' ball was killingly funny. There seemed to be a return of Spring, as happens sometimes in the last days of October; the night had a May warmth, and the occasional cold breezes passing gave additional gaiety to the atmosphere. Renée, with her head at the window, remained silent, looking at the crowd, the cafés, the restaurants, whose interminable line scudded past. She had become quite serious, lost in the depths of those vague longings that fill the reveries of women. The wide pavement, swept by the street-walkers' skirts, and ringing with peculiar familiarity under the men's boots, the gray asphalt, over which it seemed to her that the gallop of pleasure and facile love was passing, awoke her slumbering desires, and made her forget the idiotic ball which she had left, to allow her a glimpse of other and more highly-flavoured joys. At the windows of the private rooms at Brébant's, she perceived the shadows of women on the whiteness of the curtains. And Maxime told her a very improper story, of a husband who had thus detected, on a curtain, the shadow of his wife and the shadow of a lover in the act. She hardly listened to him. But he grew livelier, and ended by taking her hands and teasing her by talking of that poor M. de Mussy.

They turned back, and as they once more passed in front of Brébant's:

"Do you know," she said, suddenly, "that M. de Saffré asked me to supper this evening?"

"Oh! you would have fared badly," he replied, laughing.

"Saffré has not the slightest culinary imagination. He has not got beyond a lobster salad."

"No, no, he spoke of oysters and of cold partridge . . . . But he addressed me in the second person singular, and that bothered me . . . ."

She stopped short, looked again at the boulevard, and added after a pause, with an air of distress:

"The worst of it is that I am awfully hungry."

"What, you are hungry!" exclaimed the young man. "That's very simple, we will go and have supper together . . . . What do you say?"

He spoke quietly, but she refused at first, declaring that Céleste had put out something for her to eat at home. Meantime Maxime, who did not want to go to the Café Anglais, had stopped the cab at the corner of the Rue le Peletier, in front of the Café Riche; he even alighted, and as his stepmother still hesitated:

"As for that," he said, "if you are afraid of my compromising you, say so . . . . I will get up beside the driver and take you back to your husband."

She smiled, and alighted from the cab with the air of a bird afraid to wet its feet. She was radiant. The pavement which she felt beneath her feet warmed her heels and sent a delicious sensation of fear and of gratified caprice quivering over her skin. Ever since the cab had been rolling on, she had had a mad longing to jump out upon the pavement. She crossed it with short steps, stealthily, as though she felt a keener pleasure from the fear that she might be seen. Her escapade was decidedly turning into an adventure. She certainly did not regret having refused M. de Saffré's off-hand invitation. But she would have come home terribly cross if Maxime had not thought of letting her taste forbidden fruit. He ran upstairs quickly, as though at home. She followed him a little out of breath. Slight fumes of fish and game hung about, and the stair-carpet, secured to the steps with brass rods, had a smell of dust that increased her excitement.

As they reached the first landing, they met a dignified-looking waiter, who drew back to the wall to let them pass.

" Charles," said Maxime, " you'll wait on us, won't you? . . . Give us the white room."

Charles bowed, went up a few steps, and opened the door of a private room. The gas was lowered, it seemed to Renée as if she was penetrating into the twilight of a dubious and charming resort.

A continuous rumbling came in through the wide-open window, and on the ceiling, in the reflection cast by the café below, the shadows of the people in the street passed swiftly by. But with a twist of his thumb the waiter turned on the gas. The shadows on the ceiling disappeared, the room filled with a crude light that fell full upon Renée's head. She had already thrown back her hood. The little curls had become slightly disarranged, but the blue ribbon had not stirred. She began to walk about, confused by the way in which Charles looked at her; he blinked his eyes and screwed up the lids in order to see her better in a way which plainly argued: " Here's one I haven't seen before."

" What shall I serve, monsieur? " he asked aloud.

Maxime turned towards Renée.

" What do you say to M. de Saffré's supper? " he asked. " Oysters, a partridge . . . ."

And seeing the young man smile, Charles discreetly imitated him, murmuring:

" Wednesday's supper, then, if that will suit? "

" Wednesday's supper . . . ." repeated Maxime.

Then, remembering:

" Yes, I don't care, give us Wednesday's supper."

When the waiter had gone, Renée took her eye-glass, and went inquisitively round the room. It was a square room in white and gold, furnished with the coquetry of a boudoir. Besides the table and the chairs, there was a sort of low slab that served as a sideboard, and a broad divan, a veritable bed, which stood between the window and the fireplace. A Louis XVI clock and candle-

sticks adorned the white marble mantel. But the curiosity of the room was the mirror, a handsome long-shaped mirror, which had been scrawled over by the ladies' diamonds with names, dates, doggrel verses, prodigious sentiments and astounding avowals. Renée thought she caught sight of something beastly, and lacked the courage to satisfy her curiosity. She looked at the divan, experiencing fresh embarrassment, and at last, to give herself countenance, began gazing at the ceiling and the copper-gilt chandelier with its five jets. But the uneasiness she felt was delicious. While she raised her forehead as if to examine the cornice, seriously, and with her eye-glass in her hand, she derived profound enjoyment from this equivocal furniture which she felt about her; from that limpid, cynical mirror whose pure surface, barely wrinkled by those filthy scrawls, had helped in the adjusting of so many false chignons; from that divan whose breadth shocked her; from the table and the very carpet, in which she found the same smell as on the stairs, a subtle, penetrating, and almost religious odour of dust.

Then, when she was driven at last to lower her eyes.

"What is this supper of Wednesday?" she asked of Maxime.

"Nothing," he replied. "A bet one of my friends lost."

In any other place he would have told her without hesitation that he had supped on Wednesday with a lady he had met on the boulevard. But since entering the private room, he had instinctively treated her as a woman whose good graces one seeks to obtain and whose jealousy must be spared. She did not insist; she went and leant on the rail of the window, where he joined her. Behind them Charles came and went, with a sound of crockery and plate.

It was not yet midnight. On the boulevard below, Paris was growling, prolonging its ardent day, before deciding to go to bed. The rows of trees separated with a confused line the whiteness of the pavement from the uncertain darkness of the roadway, on which passed the rumble and the fleeting lamps of the carriages. On either edge of this dark belt, the newsvendors' kiosks shed their

light from spot to spot, like great Venetian lanterns, tall and fantastically variegated, set on the ground at regular intervals for some colossal illumination. But at this time their subdued brilliancy was lost in the flare of the neighbouring shop-fronts. Not a shutter was up, the pavement stretched out without a line of shadow, under a shower of rays that lighted it with a golden dust, with the warm and resplendent glare of daylight. Maxime showed Renée the Café Anglais, whose windows shone out in front of them. The lofty branches of the trees interfered with them a little, however, when they tried to see the houses and pavement opposite. They leant over, and looked below them. There was a continual coming and going; men walked past in groups, prostitutes in couples dragged their skirts, which they raised from time to time with a languid movement, casting weary, smiling glances around them. Right under the window, the tables of the Café Riche were spread out in the blaze of the gas-lamps, whose brilliancy extended half across the roadway; and it was especially in the centre of this burning focus that they saw the pallid faces and pale smiles of the passers-by. Around the little tables were men and women mingled together, drinking. The girls were in showy dresses, their hair dressed low down in their necks; they lounged about on chairs and made loud remarks, which the clatter prevented one from hearing. Renée noticed one in particular, sitting alone at a table, dressed in a bright-blue costume, garnished with white guipure; thrown back in her chair, she finished, sip by sip, a glass of beer, her hands on her stomach, a heavy and resigned expectant look on her face. The women on foot disappeared slowly among the crowd, and Renée, who was interested in them, followed them, gazing from one end of the boulevard to the other, into the noisy, confused depths of the avenue, full of the black swarm of pedestrians, where the lights became mere sparks. And the endless procession, a crowd strangely mixed and always alike, passed by with tiring regularity in the midst of the bright colours and patches of darkness, in the fairy-like confusion of the thousand leaping flames that swept

like waves from the shops, lending colour to the transparencies of the windows and the kiosks, running along the pavements in fillets, letters and designs of fire, piercing the darkness with stars, gliding unceasingly along the roadway. The deafening noise that rose on high had a clamour, a prolonged monotonous rumbling, like an organ-note accompanying an endless procession of little mechanical dolls. Renée at one moment thought an accident had taken place. A stream of people moved on the left, a little beyond the Passage de l'Opéra. But, taking her eye-glass, she recognized the omnibus-office. There was a crowd of people on the pavement, standing waiting, and rushing forward as soon as an omnibus arrived. She heard the rough voice of the ticket-examiner calling out the numbers, and then the tinkle of the registering bell reached her with a crystal ringing. Her eyes lighted upon the advertisements on a kiosk, glaringly coloured like Épinal prints; on a pane of glass, in a green-and-yellow frame, there was the head of a grinning devil with hair on end, a hatter's advertisement, which she failed to understand. Every five minutes the Batignolles omnibus passed, with its red lamps and yellow sides, turning the corner of the Rue le Peletier, shaking the house with its din, and she saw the men on the knife-board raise tired faces and look at them, Maxime and her, with the curious glance of famished people peering through a keyhole.

"Ah!" she said. "The Parc Monceau is fast asleep by this time."

It was the only remark she made. They stayed there for nearly twenty minutes in silence, surrendering themselves to the intoxication of the noise and light. Then, the table being laid, they went and sat down, and as she seemed embarrassed by the presence of the waiter, Maxime dismissed him.

"Leave us . . . . I will ring for dessert."

Renée's cheeks were slightly flushed, and her eyes sparkled; one would think she had just been running. She brought from the window a little of the din and animation of the boulevard. She would not let her companion close the window.

" Why, it's the orchestra! " she said, when he complained of the noise. " Don't you think it a funny sort of music? It will make a fine accompaniment to our oysters and partridge."

The escapade gave youth to her thirty years. She had quick movements and a touch of fever, and this private room, this supping alone with a young man amid the uproar of the street excited her, gave her the look of a fast woman. She attacked the oysters resolutely. Maxime was not hungry; he watched her bolt her food with a smile.

" The devil! " he murmured. " You would have made a good supper-girl."

She stopped, annoyed with herself for eating so fast.

" Do I look hungry? What can you expect? It's the hour we spent at that idiotic ball that exhausted me. . . . Ah, my poor friend, I pity you for living in a world like that! "

" You know very well," he said, " that I have promised to give up Sylvia and Laure d'Aurigny on the day your friends consent to come to supper with me."

She made a haughty gesture.

" I should rather think so! We are rather more amusing than those women, you must confess . . . . If one of us were to bore her lover as your Sylvia and your Laure d'Aurigny must bore all of you, why the poor little woman would not keep her lover a week! . . . You never will listen to me. Just try it, one of these days."

Maxime, to avoid summoning the waiter, rose, removed the oysters, and brought the partridge which was on the slab. The table had the luxurious look of the first-class restaurants. A breath of adorable debauchery passed over the damask cloth, and Renée experienced little thrills of contentment as she let her slender hands stroll from her fork to her knife, from her plate to her glass. She, who usually drank water barely tinged with claret, now drank white wine neat. Maxime, standing with his napkin over his arm, and waiting on her with comical obsequiousness, resumed:

"What can M. de Saffré have said to make you so furious? Did he tell you you were ugly?"

"Oh, he!" she replied. "He's a nasty man. I could never have believed that a gentleman who is so distinguished, so polite when at my house, could have used such language. But I forgive him. It was the women that irritated me. One would have thought they were apple-women. There was one who complained of a boil on her hip, and a little more and I believe she would have pulled up her petticoat to show all of us her sore."

Maxime was splitting with laughter.

"No, really," she continued, working herself up, "I can't understand you men; those women are dirty and dull . . . . And to think that when I saw you going off with your Sylvia I imagined wonderful scenes, ancient banquets that you see in pictures, with creatures crowned with roses, goblets of gold, extraordinary voluptuousness . . . Ah! no doubt. You showed me a dirty dressing-room, and women swearing like troopers. That's not worth being immoral for."

He wanted to protest, but she silenced him, and holding between her finger-tips a partridge-bone which she was daintily nibbling, she added, in a lower voice:

"Immorality ought to be an exquisite thing, my dear . . . When I, a straight woman, feel bored and commit the sin of dreaming of impossibilities, I am sure I think of much jollier things than all your Blanche Mullers."

And with a serious air, she concluded with this profound and frankly cynical remark:

"It is a question of education, don't you see?"

She laid the little bone gently on her plate. The rumbling of the carriages continued, with no clearer sound rising above it. She had been obliged to raise her voice for him to hear her, and the flush on her cheeks grew redder. There were still on the slab some truffles, a sweet, and some asparagus, which was out of season. He brought the lot over, so as not to have to disturb

himself again; and as the table was rather narrow, he placed on the floor between them a silver pail, full of ice, containing a bottle of champagne. Renée's appetite had ended by communicating itself to him. They tasted all the dishes, they emptied the bottle of champagne with brusque liveliness, launching out into ticklish theories, leaning their elbows on the table like two friends who relieve their hearts after drinking. The noise on the boulevard was diminishing; but to her ears, on the contrary, it seemed to increase, and at moments all these wheels would seem to be whirling round in her head.

When he spoke of ringing for dessert, she rose, shook the crumbs from her long satin blouse, and said:

"That's it . . . You can light your cigar, you know."

She was a little giddy. She went to the window, attracted by a peculiar noise which she could not explain to herself. The shops were being closed.

"Look," she said, turning towards Maxime, "the orchestra is emptying."

She leant out again. In the middle of the road, the coloured eyes of the cabs and omnibuses, fewer and faster, were still crossing one another. But on either side, along the pavements, great pits of darkness had opened out in front of the closed shops. The cafés alone were still flaming, streaking the asphalt with sheets of light. From the Rue Drouot to the Rue du Helder she thus perceived a long line of white squares and black squares, in which the last wayfarers sprang up and disappeared in a curious fashion. The street-walkers in particular, with their long-trained dresses, glaringly illuminated and immersed in darkness by turns, seemed like apparitions, like ghostly puppets crossing the lime-light of some extravaganza. She amused herself for a moment with this sight. There was no longer any wide-spread light; the gas-jets were being turned out; the variegated kiosks marked the darkness more definitely. From time to time a flood of people, issuing from some theatre, passed by. But soon there was vacancy, and there came under the window groups of men in twos or

threes whom a woman accosted. They stood debating. Some of their remarks rose audibly in the subsiding din; and then the woman generally went off on the arm of one of the men. Other girls wandered from café to café, strolled round the tables, pocketed the forgotten lumps of sugar, laughed with the waiters, and gazed fixedly with a silent, questioning, proffering look at the belated customers. And just after Renée had followed with her eyes the all but empty knifeboard of a Batignolles omnibus, she recognized, at the corner of the pavement, the woman in the blue dress with the white lace, erect, glancing about her, still in search of a man.

When Maxime came to fetch Renée from the window where she stood lost, he smiled as he looked towards one of the half-opened windows of the Café Anglais; the idea of his father, supping there on his side, struck him as humorous; but that evening he was under the influence of a peculiar form of modesty which interfered with his customary love of fun. Renée left the window-rail with regret. An intoxication and languor rose up from the vaguer depths of the boulevard. In the enfeebled rumbling of the carriages, in the obliteration of the bright lights, there was a coaxing summons to voluptuousness and sleep. The whispers that sped by, the groups assembled in shadowy corners, turned the pavement into the passage of some great inn at the hour when the travellers repair to their casual beds. The gleam and the noise continued to grow fainter and fainter, the town fell asleep, a breath of love passed over the housetops.

When Renée turned round, the light of the little chandelier made her blink her eyes. She was a little pale now, and felt slight quivers at the corners of her mouth. Charles was putting out the dessert: he went out, came in again, opening and shutting the door slowly, with the self-contained air of a man of the world.

"But I'm no longer hungry!" cried Renée. "Take away all those plates, and bring the coffee."

The waiter, accustomed to the whims of the ladies he waited

on, cleared away the dessert and poured out the coffee. He filled the room with his importance.

" Do get rid of him," said Renée, who was feeling sick, to Maxime.

Maxime dismissed him; but scarcely had he disappeared before he returned once again to draw the great window-curtains closely together with an air of discretion. When he had at last retired, the young man, seized in his turn with impatience, rose, and going to the door:

" Wait," he said, " I know a way to keep him out."

And he pushed the bolt.

" That's it," she rejoined, " we are by ourselves at last."

Their confidential, intimate chatting recommenced. Maxime had lighted a cigar. Renée sipped her coffee and even indulged in a glass of chartreuse. The room grew warmer and became filled with blue smoke. She ended by leaning her elbows on the table and resting her chin between her half-closed fists. Under this slight pressure her mouth became smaller, her cheeks were slightly raised, and her eyes, diminished in size, shone more brightly. Thus rumpled, her little face looked adorable under the rain of golden curls that now fell down upon her eye-brows. Maxime examined her through the smoke of his cigar. He thought her quaint. At times he was no longer quite sure of her sex: the great wrinkle that crossed her forehead, the pouting projection of her lips, the undecided air derived from her short-sightedness, made a big young man of her; the more so as her long black satin blouse came so high that one could barely espy, under her chin, a line of plump white neck. She let herself be looked at with a smile, no longer moving her head, her eyes lost in vacancy, her lips silent.

Then she woke up suddenly; she went and looked at the mirror towards which her dreamy eyes had been turning the last few moments. She raised herself on tip-toe, and leant her hands on the edge of the mantel, to read the signatures, the coarse remarks which before supper had frightened her off. She spelt out

the syllables with some difficulty, laughing, reading on like a school-boy turning over the pages of a Piron in his desk.

"'Ernest and Clara,'" she said, "and there is a heart underneath that looks like a funnel. . . . Ah! this is better: 'I like men because I like truffles.' Signed, 'Laure.' Tell me, Maxime, was it the d'Aurigny woman who wrote that? . . . Then here is the coat-of-arms of one of these ladies, I imagine: a hen smoking a big pipe. . . . And more names, the whole calendar of saints, male and female: Victor, Amélie, Alexandre, Edouard, Marguerite, Paquita, Louise, Renée. . . . So there's one called after me. . . ."

Maxime could see her face glowing in the glass. She raised herself still higher, and her domino, drawn more tightly behind, outlined the curve of her figure, the undulation of her hips. The young man followed the line of satin, which fitted her like a shirt. He rose in his turn, and threw away his cigar. He was ill at ease and restless. Something he was accustomed to was wanting in him.

"Ah! here is your name, Maxime," cried Renée. . . . "Listen . . . . 'I love . . . .'"

But he had sat down on the corner of the divan, almost at Renée's feet. He succeeded in taking hold of her hands with a quick movement; he turned her away from the looking-glass, and said, in a singular voice:

"Please, don't read that."

She struggled, laughing nervously.

"Why not? Am I not your confidante?"

But he insisted in a more suppressed tone:

"No, no, not to-night."

He still held her, and she tried to free herself with little jerks of the wrists. There was an unknown light in their eyes, a touch of shame in their long constrained smile. She fell on her knees at the edge of the divan. They continued struggling, although she no longer made any movement to return to the mirror, and was already surrendering herself. And as Maxime threw his

arms round her body, she said with her embarrassed, expiring laugh:

"Don't, let me alone . . . . You are hurting me."

It was the only murmur that rose to her lips. In the profound silence of the room, where the gas seemed to flare up higher, she felt the ground tremble and heard the clatter of the Batignolles omnibus turning the corner of the boulevard. And it was all over. When they recovered their position, side by side on the divan, he stammered out amid their mutual embarrassment:

"Bah! it was bound to happen sooner or later."

She said nothing. She examined the pattern of the carpet with a dumfounded air.

"Had you ever dreamt of it? . . ." continued Maxime, stammering still more. "I hadn't for a moment . . . . I ought to have mistrusted that private room."

But in a deep voice, as if all the middle-class respectability of the Bérauds du Châtel had been awakened by this supreme sin:

"This is infamous, what we have just done," she muttered, sobered, her face aged and very serious.

She was stifling. She went to the window, drew back the curtains, and leant out. The orchestra was hushed; her sin had been committed amid the last quiver of the basses and the distant chant of the violins, the vague, soft music of the boulevard asleep and dreaming of love. The roadway and pavement below stretched out and merged into gray solitude. All the growling cab-wheels seemed to have departed, carrying with them the lights and the crowd. Beneath the window, the Café Riche was closed; no shred of light gleamed through the shutters. Across the road, shimmering lights alone lit up the front of the Café Anglais, and one half-open window in particular, whence issued a faint laughter. And all along this riband of darkness, from the turn at the Rue Drouot to the other extremity, as far as her eyes could reach, she saw nothing but the symmetrical blurs of the kiosks staining the night red and green, without illuminating it, and resembling night-lights spaced along a giant dormitory. She raised

her head. The trees outlined their tall branches against a clear sky, while the irregular line of the houses died away, assuming the clustering appearance of a rocky coast on the shore of a faint blue sea. But this belt of sky saddened her still more, and only in the darkness of the boulevard could she find consolation. What lingered on the surface of the deserted road of the noise and vice of the evening made excuses for her. She thought she could feel the heat of the footsteps of all those men and women ascend from the pavement that was growing cold. The shamefulness that had lingered there, momentary lusts, whispered offerings, prepaid weddings of a night, was evaporating, was floating in a heavy mist dissipated by the breath of morning. Leaning out into the darkness, she inhaled this quivering silence, that alcove fragrance, as an encouragement that reached her from below, as an assurance of shame shared and accepted by an approving city. And when her eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, she saw the woman in the blue dress trimmed with lace standing in the same place, alone in the gray solitude, waiting and offering herself to the empty night.

On turning round, Renée perceived Charles, who was looking around for what he could see. He ended by discovering Renée's blue ribbon, lying rumpled and forgotten on a corner of the sofa. And with his civil air he hastened to take it to her. Then she realized all her shame. Standing before the glass, with awkward hands she endeavoured to refasten the ribbon. But her chignon had slipped down, her little curls had flattened on her temples, and she was unable to tie the bow. Charles came to her assistance, saying, as though he were offering an every-day thing, a finger-bowl or a toothpick:

"Would madame like the comb? . . ."

"Oh no, don't trouble," interrupted Maxime, giving the waiter an impatient look. "Go and call a cab."

Renée decided simply to pull down the hood of her domino. And as she was about to leave, she again lightly raised herself to see the words which Maxime's embrace had prevented her from

reading. Slanting upwards towards the ceiling, and written in a large, hideous hand, there was this declaration, signed Sylvia: "I love Maxime." She bit her lips and drew her hood a little lower.

In the cab they experienced a horrible sense of awkwardness. They sat facing one another, as when driving down from the Parc Monceau. They could not think of a word to say to each other. The cab was full of opaque darkness, and Maxime's cigar did not even mark it with a red dot, a glimmer of crimson charcoal. The young man, hidden again among the skirts in which he was "up to his eyes," suffered from this gloom and this silence, from the silent woman he felt beside him, whose eyes he imagined he could see staring wide open into the night. To seem less stupid he ended by feeling for her hand, and when he held it in his own, he was relieved, and found the situation tolerable. Renée abandoned her hand languidly and dreamily.

The cab crossed the Place de la Madeleine. Renée reflected that she was not to blame. She had not desired the incest. And the deeper her introspection, the more innocent she thought herself at the commencement of her escapade, at the moment of her stealthy departure from the Parc Monceau, at Blanche Muller's, on the boulevard, even in the private room at the restaurant. Then why had she fallen on her knees on the edge of that sofa? She could not think. She had certainly not thought of "that" for a moment. She would have angrily refused to give herself. It was for fun, she was amusing herself, nothing more. And in the rolling of the cab she found again the deafening orchestra of the boulevard, the coming and going of men and women, while bars of fire scorched her tired eyes.

Maxime, in his corner, was also pondering, with a certain annoyance. He was angry at the adventure. He laid the blame on the black satin domino. Whoever saw a woman rig herself out like that! You couldn't even see her neck. He had taken her for a boy and romped with her, and it was not his fault that the game had become serious. He certainly would not have touched

her with the tip of his fingers, if she had shown only a tiny bit of her shoulders. He would have remembered that she was his father's wife. Then, as he did not care for disagreeable reflections, he forgave himself. So much the worse, after all! he would try and not do it again. It was a piece of nonsense.

The cab stopped, and Maxime got down first to assist Renée. But, at the little gate of the gardens, he did not dare to kiss her. They touched hands as was their habit. She was already on the other side of the railing, when, for the sake of saying something, unwittingly confessing a preoccupation that had vaguely filled her thoughts since leaving the restaurant:

"What is that comb," she asked, "the waiter spoke of?"

"That comb," repeated Maxime, embarrassed. "I'm sure I don't know . . . ."

Renée suddenly understood. The room, no doubt, had a comb that formed part of its apparatus, like the curtains, the bolt and the sofa. And without waiting for an explanation which was not forthcoming, she plunged into the darkness of the Parc Monceau, hastening her steps and thinking she could see behind her those tortoise-shell teeth in which Laure d'Aurigny and Sylvia had left fair hair and black. She was in a high fever. Céleste had to put her to bed and sit up with her till morning. Maxime stood for a moment on the pavement of the Boulevard Malesherbes, consulting with himself whether he should join the festive party at the Café Anglais; and then, with the idea that he was punishing himself, he determined that he ought to go home to bed.

The next morning Renée woke late from a heavy, dreamless sleep. She had a large fire lighted, and said she would spend the day in her room. This was her refuge at serious moments. Towards mid-day, as her husband did not see her come down to breakfast, he asked leave to speak with her for an instant. She was already refusing the request, with a touch of nervousness, when she thought better of it. The day before she had sent down to Saccard a bill of Worms's for a hundred and thirty-six

thousand francs, a rather high figure; and doubtless he wished to indulge in the gallantry of bringing her the receipt in person.

The thought came to her of yesterday's little curls. Mechanically she looked in the glass at her hair, which Celeste had plaited into great tresses. Then she ensconced herself by the fireside, burying herself in the lace of her peignoir. Saccard, whose rooms were also on the first floor, corresponding to his wife's, entered in his slippers, a husband's privilege. He set foot barely once a month in Renée's room, and always for some delicate question of money. That morning he had the red eyes and pallid complexion of a man who has not slept. He kissed his wife's hand gallantly.

"Are you unwell, my dear?" he asked, sitting down on the opposite side of the fire-place. "A little headache, eh? . . . Forgive me for coming to worry you with my business jargon, but the thing is rather serious . . . ."

He drew from the pocket of his dressing-gown Worms's account, the cream-laid paper of which Renée recognized.

"I found this bill on my desk yesterday," he continued, "and I'm more than sorry, but I am absolutely unable to pay it at present."

With a sidelong look he watched the effect his words produced on her. She seemed profoundly astonished. He resumed with a smile:

"You know, my dear, I am not in the habit of finding fault with your expenses, though I confess that certain items of this bill have surprised me a little. As for instance, on the second page, I find: 'Ball dress: material, 70 francs; making up, 600 francs; money lent, 5,000 francs; eau du Docteur Pierre, 6 francs.' That seems pretty expensive for a seventy-franc dress . . . . But as you know I understand every kind of weakness. Your bill comes to a hundred and thirty-six thousand francs, and you have been almost moderate, comparatively speaking, I mean to say . . . . Only, as I said before, I can't pay it, I am short of money."

She held out her hand with a gesture of suppressed mortification.

"Very well," she said, curtly, "give me back the bill. I will think it over."

"I see you don't believe me," murmured Saccard, taking pleasure in his wife's incredulity on the subject of his embarrassment as though in a personal triumph. "I don't say that my position is threatened, but business is very shaky at present. . . . Allow me, although I may seem insistent, to explain to you how we stand; you have confided your dowry to me, and I owe you complete frankness."

He laid the bill on the mantel, took up the tongs, and began to stir the fire. This passion for raking the cinders while talking business was with him a system that had ended by becoming a habit. Whenever he came to an irksome figure or phrase, he brought about a subsidence which subsequently he laboriously built up, bringing the logs together, collecting and heaping up the little splinters. At another time he almost disappeared into the fire-place in search of a stray piece of charcoal. His voice grew indistinct, you grew impatient, you became interested in his cunning constructions of glowing firewood, you omitted to listen to him, and as a rule you left his presence beaten and satisfied. Even at other people's houses he despotically took possession of the tongs. In summer-time he played with a pen, a paper-knife, a pen-knife.

"My dear," he said, giving a great blow that sent the fire flying, "I once more beg your pardon for entering into these details. . . . I have punctually made over to you the interest on the money you placed in my hands. I can even say, without hurting your feelings, that I have only looked upon that interest as your pocket-money for your private disbursements, and that I have never asked you to contribute your share to the common household expenses."

He paused. Renée suffered, as she watched him making a large

hole in the cinders to bury the end of a log. He was approaching a delicate confession.

"I have had, you understand, to make your money pay a high interest. You can be easy, the principal is in good hands . . . . As to the amounts coming from your property in the Sologne, they have partly gone to pay for the house we live in; the remainder is invested in an excellent company, the Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco . . . . We have not got to settle accounts yet, have we? But I want to show you that we poor husbands are sometimes not half appreciated."

A powerful motive must have impelled him to lie less than usual. The truth was that Renée's dowry had long ceased to exist; it had become a fictitious asset in Saccard's safe. Although he paid out interest on it at the rate of two or three hundred per cent. or more, he could not have produced the least security or found the smallest solid particle of the original capital. As he half confessed, moreover, the five hundred thousand francs of the Sologne property had been used to pay a first instalment on the house and the furniture, which together cost close upon two millions. He still owed a million to the upholsterer and the builders.

"I make no claim on you," Renée said at last; "I know I am very much in your debt."

"Oh, my dear," he cried, taking his wife's hand, without relinquishing the tongs, "what a horrid thing to say! . . . Listen, in two words, I have been unlucky on the Bourse, Toutin-Laroche has made a fool of himself, and Mignon and Charrier are a pair of crooks who have taken me in. And that is why I can't pay your bill. You forgive me, don't you?"

He seemed genuinely moved. He dug the tongs in among the logs, and made the sparks burst out like fireworks. Renée remembered how restless he had been for some time past. But she was unable to realize the astonishing truth. Saccard had reached the point of having to perform a daily miracle. He resided in

a house that cost two millions, he lived on a princely footing, and there were mornings when he had not a thousand francs in his safe. His expenditure did not seem to diminish. He lived upon debt among a race of creditors who swallowed up from day to day the scandalous profits that he realized from certain transactions. In the meantime and at the same moment companies crumbled beneath his feet, new and deeper pits yawned before him, over which he had to leap, unable to fill them up. He thus trod over sapped ground, amid a chronic crisis, settling bills of fifty thousand francs and leaving his coachman's wages unpaid, marching on with a more and more regal assurance, emptying over Paris with increasing frenzy his empty cash-box, from which continued to flow the golden stream with the fabulous source.

Speculation was passing through a bad period at that moment. Saccard was a worthy offspring of the Hôtel de Ville. He had undergone the rapidity of transformation, the frenzy for enjoyment, the blindness to expense that was shaking Paris. He now again resembled the Municipality in finding himself face to face with a formidable deficit which it was necessary secretly to make good; for he would not hear speak of prudence, of economy, of a calm and respectable existence. He preferred to keep up the useless luxury and real penury of those new thoroughfares whence he had derived his colossal fortune, which came into being each morning to be swallowed up at night. Passing from adventure to adventure, he now only possessed the gilded façade of a missing capital. In this period of eager madness, Paris itself did not risk its future with greater rashness or march straighter towards every folly and every trick of finance. The winding-up threatened to be disastrous.

The most promising speculations turned out badly in Saccard's hands. As he said, he had just written off considerable losses on the Bourse. M. Toutin-Laroche had almost caused the Crédit Viticole to founder through a gamble for a rise that had suddenly turned against him; fortunately the Government, intervening

under the rose, had set the famous wine-growers's mortgage loan-machine on its legs again. Saccard, badly shaken by this sudden blow, seriously upbraided by his brother for the danger that had threatened the delegation bonds of the Municipality, which was involved with the Crédit Viticole, was even still more unfortunate in his speculations in house-property. The Mignon and Charrier pair had broken with him entirely. If he accused them it was because he was secretly enraged at his mistake of having built on his share of the ground while they prudently sold theirs. While they were making their fortune, he was left behind with houses on his hands that he was often unable to dispose of save at a loss. Among others he sold a house in the Rue de Marignan, on which he still owed three hundred and eighty thousand francs, for three hundred thousand francs. He had certainly invented a trick of his own which consisted in asking ten thousand francs a year for an apartment worth eight thousand at most. The terrified tenant only signed a lease when the landlord had consented to forego the first two years' rent. In this way the apartment was brought down to its real value, but the lease bore the figure of ten thousand francs a year, and when Saccard found a purchaser and capitalized the income from the house, the calculation became an absolute phantasmagoria. He was not able to practise this swindle on a large scale: his houses would not let; he had built them too early; the clearings in which they stood, lost in the mud of winter, isolated them, and considerably reduced their value. The affair that affected him the most was the coarse piece of trickery of the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, who bought back from him the house on the Boulevard Malesherbes, the building of which he had had to abandon. The contractors were at last smitten with the desire to inhabit "their boulevard." As they had sold their share of the ground above its value, and suspected the embarrassment of their former partner, they offered to relieve him of the enclosure in the centre of which the house stood completed up to the flooring of the first story, whose iron girders were partly laid. Only they treated the solid freestone

foundations as useless rubbish, saying that they would have preferred the ground bare, so as to build on it according to their taste. Saccard was obliged to sell, without taking into account the hundred and odd thousand francs he had already expended, and what exasperated him still further was that the contractors persistently refused to take back the ground at two hundred and fifty francs the mètre, the figure fixed at the time of the division. They beat him down twenty-five francs a mètre, like those second-hand clothes-women who give only four francs for a thing they have sold for five the day before. Two days later Saccard had the mortification of seeing an army of bricklayers invade the boarded enclosure and go on building upon the "useless rubbish."

He was thus all the better able to play before his wife at being pressed for money, as his affairs were becoming more and more involved. He was not the man to confess from sheer love of truth.

"But, monsieur," said Renée, with an air of doubtfulness, "if you are in difficulties for money, why have you bought me that aigrette and necklace which cost you, I believe, sixty-five thousand francs? . . . I have no use for those jewels, and I shall have to ask your permission to dispose of them so as to pay Worms something on account."

"Take care not to do that!" he cried anxiously. "If you were not seen wearing those diamonds at the ministry ball to-morrow, people would invent stories about my position . . . ."

He was in a genial mood that morning. He ended by smiling and murmuring with a wink:

"We speculators, my dear, are like pretty women, we have our little artifices . . . . Keep your aigrette and necklace, I beg, for love of me."

He could not tell the story, a very pretty one but a little risky. It was after supper one night that Saccard and Laure d'Aurigny had entered into an alliance. Laure was over head and ears in debt, and her one thought was to find a good young man who

would elope with her and take her to London. Saccard on his side felt the ground crumbling beneath his feet; his imagination, driven to bay, sought an expedient which would display him to the public sprawling on a bed of gold and bank-notes. The courtesan and the speculator had come to an understanding amid the semi-intoxication of dessert. He hit upon the idea of that sale of diamonds which set all Paris agog; and there, with a deal of fuss, he bought jewels for his wife. Then with the product of the sale, about four hundred thousand francs, he managed to satisfy Laure's creditors, to whom she owed nearly twice as much. It is even to be presumed that he recouped part of his sixty-five thousand francs. When he was seen settling the d'Aurigny affairs, he was looked upon as her lover, and believed to be paying her debts in full and committing extravagances for her. Every hand was stretched out to him, his credit revived formidably. And on the Bourse he was chaffed about his passion, with smiles and insinuations that entranced him. Meanwhile Laure d'Aurigny, brought into prominence by this hubbub, although he had never spent a single night with her, pretended to deceive him with nine or ten idiots enticed by the notion of stealing her from a man of such colossal wealth. In one month she had two sets of furniture and more diamonds than she had sold. Saccard had got into the way of going to smoke a cigar with her in the afternoon on leaving the Bourse; he often caught sight of coat-tails flying through the doorways in terror. When they were alone, they could not look at one another without laughing. He kissed her on the forehead as though she were a wayward wench whose roguery delighted him. He did not give her a sou, and on one occasion she even lent him money to pay a gambling debt.

Renée tried to insist, and spoke of at least pawning the diamonds; but her husband gave her to understand that that was not possible, that all Paris expected to see her wear them on the morrow. Then Renée, who was much worried about Worms's bill, sought another way out of the difficulty.

"But," she suddenly exclaimed, "my Charonne property is

going on all right, is it not? You were telling me only the other day that the profit would be superb . . . . Perhaps Larsonneau would advance me a hundred and thirty-six thousand francs? "

Saccard had for a moment forgotten the tongs between his legs. He now hastily seized them again, leant forward, and almost disappeared in the fire-place, whence the young woman indistinctly heard his voice muttering:

" Yes, yes, Larsonneau might perhaps . . . ."

She was at last coming of her own accord to the point to which he had been gently leading her since the beginning of the conversation. He had already for two years been preparing his masterstroke in the Charonne district. His wife had never consented to part with Aunt Elisabeth's estate; she had promised her to keep it intact, so as to leave it to her child if she became a mother. In the presence of this obstinacy, the speculator's imagination had set to work, and ended by building up quite a poem. It was a work of exquisite villainy, a colossal piece of cheating, of which the Municipality, the State, his wife, and even Larsonneau were to be the victims. He no longer spoke of selling the building-plots; only every day he deplored the folly of leaving them unproductive and contenting one's self with a return of two per cent. Renée, who was always in urgent need of money, ended by entertaining the idea of a speculation of some kind. He based his operations on the certainty of an expropriation for the cutting of the Boulevard du Prince-Eugène, the direction of which was not yet clearly resolved upon. And it was then that he brought forward his old accomplice Larsonneau as a partner, who made an agreement with his wife on the following basis: she brought the building-plots, representing a value of five hundred thousand francs; Larsonneau on the other hand agreed to spend an equal sum on building upon this ground a music-hall with a large garden attached, where games of all kinds, swings, skittle-alleys and bowling-greens would be set up. The profits were naturally to be divided, as the losses would be borne in equal shares. In the event of one of the two partners wishing to withdraw, he could

do so and claim his share, which would be fixed by a valuation. Renée seemed surprised at the large figure of five hundred thousand francs, when the ground was worth three hundred thousand at the utmost. But he explained to her that it was an ingenious plan for tying Larsonneau's hands later on, as his buildings would never represent such an amount as that.

Larsonneau had developed into an elegant man-about-town, well-gloved, with dazzling linen and astounding cravats. To go on his errands he had a tilbury as light as a piece of clockwork, with a very high seat, which he drove himself. His offices in the Rue de Rivoli were a sumptuous suite of rooms in which there was not a bundle of papers, not a business document to be seen. His clerks worked at tables of stained pear-wood, inlaid with marquetry and adorned with chased brass. He called himself an expropriation-agent, a new calling which the works of Paris had brought into being. His connection with the Hôtel de Ville caused him to receive early information of the cutting of any new thoroughfare. When he had succeeded in learning the line of route of a boulevard from one of the surveyors of roads, he went and offered his services to the threatened landlords. And he turned his little plan for increasing the compensation to account by acting before the decree of public utility was issued. So soon as a landlord accepted his proposals, he took all the expenses on himself, drew up a plan of the property, wrote out a memorandum, followed up the case before the court and paid an advocate, all for a percentage on the difference between the offer of the Municipality and the compensation awarded by the jury. But to this almost justifiable branch of business he added a number of others. He more especially lent out money at interest. He was not the usurer of the old school, ragged and dirty, with eyes pale and expressionless as five-franc pieces, and lips white and drawn together like the strings of a purse. He was a radiant person, had a charming way of ogling, got his clothes at Dusautoy's, went and lunched at Brébant's with his victim, whom he called "old man," and offered him Havannahs at dessert. In reality, be-

neath his waistcoats tightly buckled round his waist, Larsonneau was a terrible gentleman, who would have insisted on the payment of a note of hand until he had driven the acceptor to suicide, and this without losing a grain of amiability.

Saccard would gladly have looked for another partner. But he was always anxious on the subject of the false inventory, which Larsonneau preciously preserved. He preferred to take him into the affair, hoping to avail himself of some circumstance to regain possession of that compromising document. Larsonneau built the music-hall, an edifice of planks and plaster surmounted by little tin turrets, which were painted bright red and yellow. The garden and the games proved successful in the populous district of Charonne. In two years the speculation looked prosperous, although the profits in reality were very slight. Saccard had so far always spoken enthusiastically to his wife of the prospects of this fine idea.

Renée, seeing that her husband would not make up his mind to come out of the fire-place, where his voice was becoming more and more inaudible, said:

"I will go and see Larsonneau to-day. It is my only chance."

Then he let go the log with which he was struggling.

"The errand's done, my dear," he replied, smiling. "Don't I forestall all your wishes? . . . I saw Larsonneau last night."

"And he promised you the hundred and thirty-six thousand francs?" she enquired anxiously.

He was building up between the two flaming logs a little mountain of embers, picking up daintily with the tongs the smallest fragments of burnt wood, looking with a satisfied air at the progress of the eminence which he was constructing with infinite art.

"Oh! how you rattle on! . . ." he murmured. "A hundred and thirty-six thousand francs is a large sum . . . . Larsonneau is a good fellow, but his means are still limited. He is quite ready to oblige you . . . ."

He paused, blinking his eyes and rebuilding a corner of the

eminence which had fallen through. This pastime began to confuse Renée's ideas. In spite of herself she followed the work of her husband, whose awkwardness increased. She felt tempted to advise him. Forgetting Worms, the bill, her need of money, she ended by saying:

"Put that big piece at the bottom; then the others will keep up."

Her husband obeyed her submissively, and added:

"All he can find is fifty thousand francs. That will at least be a nice bit on account . . . . Only he does not want to mix this up with the Charonne affair. He is only a go-between, do you understand, my dear? The person who lends the money asks an enormous interest. He wants a note of hand for eighty thousand francs at six months' date."

And having crowned the edifice with a pointed cinder, he crossed his hands over the tongs and looked fixedly at his wife.

"Eighty thousand francs!" she cried. "But that's sheer robbery! . . . Do you advise me to commit this folly?"

"No," he replied shortly. "But if you absolutely want the money, I won't forbid it."

He rose as though to go. Renée, in a state of cruel indecision, looked at her husband and at the bill which he left on the mantel. At last she took her poor head between her hands, murmuring:

"Oh, these business matters! . . . My head is splitting this morning . . . . Well, I must sign this note for eighty thousand francs. If I didn't I should become altogether ill. I know myself, I should spend the day in a frightful struggle . . . . I prefer to do something stupid at once. That relieves me."

And she spoke of ringing to send for a bill-stamp. But he insisted on rendering her this service in person. No doubt he had the bill stamp in his pocket, for he was absent for hardly two minutes. While she was writing at a little table he had pushed towards the fire, he examined her with eyes in which arose an astonished light of desire. The room was still full of the warmth of the bed she had quitted and of the fragrance of her first toilet.

While talking she had allowed the folds of the peignoir in which she was wrapped to slip down, and the eyes of her husband, as he stood before her, glided over her bent head, through the gold of her hair, and very low down, into the whiteness of her neck and bosom. He wore a curious smile; the glowing fire, which had burnt his face, the close room, whose heavy atmosphere retained an odour of love, the yellow hair and white skin, which tempted him with a sort of conjugal scornfulness, set him dreaming, widened the scope of the drama in which he had just played a scene, and prompted some secret voluptuous calculation in his brutal jobber's flesh.

When his wife handed him the acceptance, begging him to finish the matter for her, he took it without removing his eyes from her.

"You are bewitchingly beautiful . . . ." he murmured.

And as she bent forward to push away the table, he kissed her rudely on the neck. She gave a little cry. Then she rose, quivering, trying to laugh, thinking, in spite of herself, of the other's kisses of the night before. But he seemed to regret this unmannerly kiss. He left her, with a friendly pressure of the hand, and promised her that she should have the fifty thousand francs that same evening.

Renée dozed all day before the fire. At critical periods she had the languor of a Creole. All her turbulent nature would then become indolent, numbed, chill. She shivered with cold, she needed blazing fires, a stifling heat that brought little drops of perspiration to her forehead and lulled her. In this burning atmosphere, in this bath of flames, she almost ceased to suffer; her pain became as a light dream, a vague oppression, whose very uncertainty ended by becoming voluptuous. Thus she lulled till the evening the remorse of yesterday, in the red glow of the firelight, in front of a terrible fire, that made the furniture crack around her, and that at moments deprived her of the consciousness of her existence. She was able to think of Maxime as of a flaming enjoyment whose rays burnt her; she had a nightmare of

strange passions amid flaring logs on white-hot beds. Céleste moved to and fro through the room, with her calm face, the face of a cold-blooded waiting-maid. She had orders to admit no one, she even sent away the inseparables, Adeline d'Espanet and Suzanne Haffner, who called after breakfasting together in a summer-house they rented at Saint-Germain. However, when, towards the evening, Céleste came to tell her mistress that Madame Sidonie, monsieur's sister, asked to see her, she received orders to show her up.

Madame Sidonie as a rule did not call till dusk. Her brother had nevertheless prevailed upon her to wear silk gowns. But, no one knew why, for all that the silk she wore came fresh from the shop, it never looked new; it was shabby, lost its sheen, looked a rag. She had also consented to leave off bringing her basket to the Saccards. By way of retaliation, her pockets bulged over with papers. She took an interest in Renée, of whom she was unable to make a reasonable client, resigned to the necessities of life. She called on her regularly, with the discreet smiles of a physician who does not care to frighten his patient by telling her the name of her complaint. She commiserated with her in her little worries, treating them as little aches and pains which she could cure in a minute if Renée wished it. The latter, who was in one of those moments when one feels the need of pity, received her only to tell her that she had intolerable pains in her head.

"Why, my beautiful pet," murmured Mme. Sidonie as she glided through the shade of the room, "but you're stifling here! . . . Still your neuralgic pains, is it? It comes from worry. You take life too much to heart."

"Yes, I have a heap of anxiety," replied Renée, languishingly.

Night was falling. She had not allowed Céleste to light the lamp. The fire alone shed a great red glow that lighted her up fully, outstretched in her white peignoir, whose lace was assuming rose tints. At the edge of the shadow one could just see a corner of Mme. Sidonie's black dress, and her two crossed hands,

covered with gray cotton gloves. Her soft voice emerged from the darkness.

"Money-troubles again?" she asked, as though she had said troubles of the heart, in a voice full of gentleness and compassion.

Renée lowered her eyelids and nodded assent.

"Ah! if my brothers would listen to me, we should all be rich. But they shrug their shoulders when I speak to them of that debt of three milliards, you know . . . . Still I have good hopes. For the last ten years I have been wanting to go across to England. I have so little time to spare! . . . At last I resolved to write to London, and I am waiting the reply."

And as the younger woman smiled:

"I know you are an unbeliever yourself. Still you would be very pleased if I made you a present one of these days of a nice little million . . . . Look here, the story is quite simple: there was a Paris banker who lent the money to the son of the King of England, and as the banker died without direct heirs, the State is to-day entitled to claim payment of the debt with compound interest. I have worked it out, it comes to two milliards, nine hundred and forty-three millions, two hundred and ten thousand francs . . . . Never fear, it will come, it will come."

"In the meantime," said Renée, with a dash of irony, "I wish you would get some one to lend me a hundred thousand francs . . . . I could then pay my tailor, who is making himself a great nuisance."

"A hundred thousand francs can be found," replied Mme. Sidonie, tranquilly. "It is only a question of what you will give in exchange."

The fire was glowing; Renée, still more languid, stretched out her legs, showed the tips of her slippers at the edge of her dressing-gown. The agent resumed her sympathetic voice:

"My poor dear, you are really not reasonable. I know many women, but I have never seen one so little careful of her health as you. That little Michelin, for instance, see how well she

manages! I cannot help thinking of you whenever I see her in good health and spirits . . . . Do you know that M. de Saffré is madly in love with her, and that he has already given her close upon ten thousand francs' worth of presents? I believe her dream is to have a house in the country."

She grew excited, she fumbled in her pocket.

"I have here again a letter from a poor young married woman. . . . If it was light enough, I would let you read it. . . . Just think, her husband takes no notice of her. She had accepted some bills, and was obliged to borrow the money from a gentleman I know. I went myself and rescued the bills from the bailiff's clutches, and it was no easy matter. . . . Those poor children, do you think they do wrong? I receive them at my place as though they were my son and daughter."

"Do you know anyone who would lend me the money?" asked Renée, casually.

"I know a dozen. . . . You are too kind-hearted. One can say anything between women, can't one? and it's not because your husband is my brother that I would excuse him for running after the hussies and leaving a love of a woman like you to mope at the fireside. . . . That Laure d'Aurigny costs him heaps and heaps. I should not be surprised to hear that he had refused you money. He has refused you, has he not? . . . Oh, the wretch!"

Renée listened complacently to this mellifluous voice, that issued from the shadow like the echo, vague as yet, of her own dreams. With eyelids half-closed, lying almost at length in her easy-chair, she was no longer conscious of Mme. Sidonie's presence, she thought she was dreaming of evil thoughts that came to her and tempted her very gently. The business-woman kept up a long prattle like the monotonous flow of tepid water.

"It is Mme. de Lauwerens who has marred your life. You never would believe me. Ah! you wouldn't be reduced to crying in your chimney-corner, if you hadn't mistrusted me . . . . And I love you like my eyes, you beautiful thing. What a bewitching foot you have. You will laugh at me, but I must

tell you how silly I am: when I have gone three days without seeing you, I feel obsolutely obliged to come and admire you; yes, I feel I want something; I feel the need of feasting my eyes on your lovely hair, your face, so white, so delicate, your slender figure . . . . Really I have never seen such a figure."

Renée ended by smiling. Her lovers themselves did not display such warmth, such rapt ecstasy, in speaking to her of her beauty. Mme. Sidonie observed the smile.

"Well then, it's agreed," she said, rising briskly. . . . "I run on and on, and forget that I am making your head split. . . . You will come to-morrow, will you not? We will talk of money, we will look about for a lender . . . . Understand, I want you to be happy."

Still motionless, enervated by the heat, Renée replied, after a pause, as though it had cost her a laborious effort to understand what was being said to her:

"Yes, I will come, that's agreed, and we will talk; but not to-morrow. . . . Worms will be satisfied with an instalment. When he worries me again, we will see. . . . Don't talk to me of all that any more. My head is shattered with business."

Mme. Sidonie seemed very much vexed. She was on the point of sitting down again, of resuming her caressing monologue; but Renée's weary attitude decided her to postpone her attack until later. She drew a handful of papers from her pocket, and searched among them until she found an article enclosed in a sort of pink box.

"I came to recommend to you a new soap," she said, resuming her business voice. "I take a great interest in the inventor, who is a charming young man. It is a very soft soap, very good for the skin. You will try it, won't you? and talk of it to your friends . . . I will leave it here, on the mantel-piece."

She had reached the door, when she returned once more, and standing erect in the crimson glow of the fire, with her waxen face, she began to sing the praises of an elastic belt, an invention intended to take the place of corsets.

"It gives you a waist absolutely round, a genuine wasp's waist," she said. . . . "I saved it from bankruptcy. When you come you can try on the samples if you like. . . . I had to run after the lawyers for a week. The documents are in my pocket, and I am going straight to my bailiff now to put a stop to a final opposition. . . . Good-bye for the present, darling. You know, I shall expect you: I want to dry those pretty eyes of yours."

She glided out of sight. Renée did not even hear her close the door. She stayed there before the expiring fire, continuing her dream of the whole day, her head full of dancing numerals, hearing the voices of Saccard and of Madame Sidonie talking in the distance, offering her large sums of money, in the voice in which an auctioneer puts up a lot of furniture. She felt her husband's coarse kiss on her neck, and when she turned round, she fancied the woman of business was at her feet, making passionate speeches to her, praising her perfections, and begging for an assignation with the attitude of a lover on the verge of despair. This made her smile. The heat of the room became more and more stifling. And Renée's stupor, the fantastic dreams she had, were no more than a light slumber. An artificial slumber, in the depths of which constantly recurred to her the little private room on the boulevard, the large sofa upon which she had fallen on her knees. She no longer suffered in the least. When she opened her eyes, Maxime's image passed through the crimson firelight.

The next day, at the ministry ball, the beautiful Madame Saccard was wondrous. Worms had accepted the fifty thousand francs on account, and she emerged from her financial straits with the laughter of convalescence. When she traversed the reception rooms in her great dress of rose faille with its long Louis XIV train, edged with deep white lace, there was a murmur, men jostled each other to see her. And those who were her friends bowed low, with a discreet smile of appreciation, doing homage to those beautiful shoulders, so well known to all official

Paris and looked upon as the firm pillars of the Empire. She had bared her bosom with so great a contempt for the looks of others, she walked so serene and gentle in her nakedness, that it almost ceased to be indecent. Eugène Rougon, the great politician, felt that this nude bosom was even more eloquent than his speeches in the Chamber, softer and more persuasive in making people relish the charms of the reign and in convincing the doubtful. He went up to his sister-in-law to compliment her on her happy stroke of audacity in lowering her bodice yet another inch. Almost all the Corps Législatif was there, and from the air with which the deputies looked at the young married woman, the minister foresaw a fine success on the morrow in the delicate matter of the loans of the City of Paris. It was impossible to vote against a power that raised on the compost of millions a flower like this Renée, a so strange flower of voluptuousness, with silken flesh and statuesque nudity, a living joy that left behind it a fragrance of tepid pleasure. But what set the whole ball-room whispering was the necklace and aigrette. The men recognized the jewels. The women furtively called each other's attention to them with a glance. Nothing else was talked of the whole evening. And the suite of reception rooms stretched away in the white light of the chandeliers, filled with a glittering throng like a medley of stars fallen into too confined a corner.

At about one o'clock Saccard disappeared. He relished his wife's triumph as a successful piece of clap-trap. He had once more consolidated his credit. A matter of business required his presence at Laure d'Aurigny's; he went off, and begged Maxime to take Renée home after the ball.

Maxime spent the evening staidly by the side of Louise de Mareuil, both very much taken up in saying shocking things about the women who passed to and fro. And when they had uttered some coarser piece of nonsense than usual, they stifled their laughter in their pocket-handkerchiefs. When Renée wished to leave, she had to come and ask the young man for his arm. In the carriage she showed a nervous gaiety; she still

quivered with the intoxication of light, perfumes and sounds that she had just passed through. She seemed besides to have forgotten their " folly " of the boulevard, as Maxime called it. She only asked him, in a singular tone of voice:

" Is that little hunchback of a Louise so very amusing, then? "

" Oh, very amusing . . ." replied the young man, still laughing. " You saw the Duchess de Sternich with a yellow bird in her hair, didn't you? . . . Well, Louise pretends that it's a clock-work bird that flaps its wings every hour and cries, ' Cuckoo! cuckoo! ' to the poor duke."

Renée thought this pleasantry of the emancipated school-girl very entertaining. When they had reached home, as Maxime was about to take leave of her, she said to him:

" Are you not coming up? Céleste has no doubt got me something to eat."

He came up in his usual compliant fashion. There was nothing to eat upstairs, and Céleste had gone to bed. Renée had to light the tapers in a little three-branched candlestick. Her hand trembled a little.

" That foolish creature," she said, speaking of her maid, " must have misunderstood what I told her. . . . I shall never be able to undress myself all alone."

She passed into her dressing-room. Maxime followed her, to tell her a fresh jest of Louise's that recurred to his mind. He was as much at ease as though he had been loitering at a friend's and was feeling for his cigar-case to light a Havannah. But when Renée had set down the candlestick, she turned round and fell into the young man's arms, speechless and disquieting, gluing her mouth to his mouth.

Renée's private apartment was a nest of silk and lace, a marvel of luxurious coquetry. A tiny boudoir led into the bedroom. The two rooms formed but one, or at least the boudoir was nothing more than the threshold of the bedroom, a large recess, furnished with long-chairs, and with a pair of hangings instead of a door. The walls of both rooms were hung with the same

material, a heavy pale-gray silk, figured with huge bouquets of roses, white lilac, and buttercups. The curtains and door-hangings were of Venetian lace over a silk lining of alternate gray and pink bands. In the bedroom the white marble chimney-piece, of real jewel, displayed like a basket of flowers its incrustations of lapis lazuli and precious mosaic, repeating the roses, white lilac, and buttercups of the tapestry. A large gray-and-pink bed, whose woodwork was hidden beneath padding and upholstery, and whose head stood against the wall, filled quite one-half of the room with its flow of drapery, its lace and its silk figured with bouquets, falling from ceiling to carpet. As one should say a woman's dress, rounded and slashed and decked with puffs and bows and flounces; and the large curtain, swelling out like a skirt, raised thoughts of some tall, amorous girl, leaning over, swooning, almost falling back upon the pillows. Beneath the curtains it was a sanctuary: cambric finely plaited, a snowy mass of lace, all sorts of delicate diaphanous things immersed in religious dimness. By the side of the bedstead, of this monument whose devout ampleness recalled a chapel decorated for some festival, the rest of the furniture subsiding into nothingness: low chairs, a cheval-glass six feet high, presses provided with innumerable drawers. Under foot, the carpet, blue-gray, was covered with pale full-blown roses. And on either side of the bed lay two great black bearskin rugs, edged with crimson velvet, with silver claws, and with their heads turned towards the window, gazing fixedly through their glass eyes at the empty sky.

Soft harmony, muffled silence reigned in this chamber. No shrill note, no metallic reflection, no bright gilding broke through the dreamy chant of pink and gray. Even the chimney ornaments, the frame of the mirror, the clock, the little candlesticks, were of old Sèvres, and the mountings of copper-gilt were scarcely visible. Marvellous ornaments, the clock especially, with its ring of chubby Cupids, who climbed and leaned over the dial-plate like a troop of naked urchins mocking at the quick flight of time. This subdued luxury, these colours and ornaments

which Renée's taste had chosen soft and smiling, lent to the room a crepuscular light like that of an alcove with curtains drawn. The bed seemed to prolong itself till the room became one immense bed, with its carpets, its bearskin rugs, its padded seats, its stuffed hangings which continued the softness of the floor along the walls and up to the ceiling. And as in a bed, Renée left upon all these things the imprint, the warmth, the perfume of her body. When one drew aside the double hangings of the boudoir, it seemed as if one were raising a silken counterpane and entering some great couch, still warm and moist, where one found on the fine linen the adorable shape, the slumber and the dreams of a Parisian woman of thirty.

An adjoining closet, a spacious chamber hung with antique chintz, was simply furnished on every side with tall rosewood wardrobes, containing an army of dresses. Céleste, always methodical, arranged the dresses according to their dates, labelled them, introduced arithmetic amid her mistress's blue and yellow caprices, and kept this closet as reposeful as a sacristy and as clean as a stable. There was no furniture in the room; not a rag lay about. The wardrobe-doors shone cold and clean like the varnished panels of a brougham.

But the wonder of the apartment, the room that was the talk of Paris, was the dressing-room. One said: "The beautiful Madame Saccard's dressing-room," as one says: "The Gallery of Mirrors at Versailles." This room was situated in one of the towers, just above the little buttercup drawing-room. On entering, one was reminded of a large circular tent, an enchanted tent, pitched in a dream by some love-lorn Amazon. In the centre of the ceiling a crown of chased silver upheld the drapery of the tent, which ran, with a curve, to the walls, whence it fell straight down to the floor. This drapery, these rich hangings, consisted of pink silk covered with very thin muslin, plaited in wide folds at regular intervals. A band of lace separated the folds, and fillets of wrought silver ran down from the crown and glided down the hangings along either edge of each of the bands. The

pink and gray of the bedroom grew brighter here, became a pink and white, like naked flesh. And under this bower of lace, under these curtains that hid all the ceiling save a pale blue cavity inside the narrow circlet of the crown, where Chaplin had painted a wanton Cupid looking down and preparing his dart, one would have thought one's self at the bottom of a comfit-box, or in some precious jewel-case enlarged as though to display a woman's nudity instead of the brilliancy of a diamond. The carpet, white as snow, stretched out without the least pattern or flower. The furniture consisted of a cupboard with plate-glass doors, whose two panels were inlaid with silver; a long-chair, two ottomans, some white satin stools; and a great toilet-table with a pink marble slab and legs hidden under flounces of muslin and lace. The glasses on the toilet-table, the bottles, the basin were of antique Bohemian crystal, streaked pink and white. And there was yet another table, inlaid with silver like the looking-glass cupboard, on which all the paraphernalia and toilet utensils were laid out, like the contents of a fantastic surgeon's case, displaying a large number of little instruments of puzzling purpose, back-scratchers, nail-polishers, files of every shape and dimension, straight scissors and curved, every species of tweezer and pin. Each one of these articles of silver and ivory was marked with Renée's monogram.

But the dressing-room had a delightful corner, which corner in particular made it famous. In front of the window the folds of the tent parted and disclosed, in a kind of long, shallow alcove, a bath, a tank of pink marble sunk into the floor, with sides fluted like those of a large shell and rising to a level with the carpet. Marble steps led down into the bath. Above the silver taps, shaped like swans' necks, the back of the alcove was filled with a Venetian mirror, frameless, with curved edges, and a ground design on the crystal. Every morning Renée took a bath that lasted some minutes. This bath filled the dressing-room for the whole day with moisture, with a fragrance of fresh, wet flesh. Sometimes an unstoppered scent-bottle, a cake of soap left

out of its dish, struck a more violent note in this somewhat insipid languor. Renée was fond of staying there till mid-day, almost naked. The round tent for its part was naked also. The pink bath, the pink slabs and basins, the muslin of the walls and ceiling, under which a pink blood seemed to course, acquired the curves of flesh, the curves of shoulders and breasts; and, according to the time of day, one would have thought of the snowy skin of a child or the hot skin of a woman. It was a vast nudity. When Renée left her bath, her fair-complexioned body added but a little more pink to all the pink flesh of the room.

It was Maxime who undressed Renée. He understood that sort of thing, and his quick hands divined pins and glided round her waist with innate science. He undid her hair, took off her diamonds, dressed her hair for the night. He added jests and caresses to the performance of his duties as lady's-maid and hair-dresser, and Renée laughed, with a broad stifled laugh, while the silk of her bodice cracked and her petticoats were loosened one by one. When she saw herself naked, she blew out the tapers of the candlestick, caught Maxime round the body, and all but carried him into the bedroom. The ball had completed her intoxication. In her fever she was conscious of the previous day spent by the fireside, of that day of ardent stupor, of vague and smiling dreams. She still heard the harsh voice of Saccard and Madame Sidonie talking, calling out figures through their noses like lawyers. Those were the people who overwhelmed her, who drove her to crime. And even now, when she sought his lips in the depths of the vast, dark bed, she still saw Maxime's image in the firelight of yesterday, looking at her with eyes that scorched her.

The young man did not leave her till six in the morning. She gave him the key of the little gate of the Parc Monceau, and made him swear to come back every night. The dressing-room communicated with the buttercup drawing-room by a servants' staircase hidden in the wall, which connected all the rooms in the tower. From the drawing-room it was easy to pass into the conservatory and reach the gardens.

On going out at daylight in a thick fog, Maxime was a little bewildered by his adventure. He accepted it, however, with the epicene complacency that formed part of his being.

"So much the worse!" he thought. "It's she who wishes it after all . . . . She is deucedly well made; and she was right, she is twice as jolly in bed as Sylvia."

They had drifted towards incest since the day when Maxime, in his threadbare schoolboy tunic, had hung on Renée's neck, creasing her French-guard's coat. From that time forward there had been a long and constant perversion between them. The strange education the young woman gave the child; the familiarities that made boon companions of them; later on, the laughing audacity of their confidences; all this dangerous promiscuity had ended by linking them together by a singular bond, in which the delights of friendship came near to carnal indulgence. They had given themselves to one another for years; the animal act was but the acute crisis of this unconscious malady of passion. In the maddened world in which they lived, their sin had sprouted as on a dunghill oozing with equivocal juices; it had developed with strange refinements amid special conditions of debauch.

When the great calash carried them to the Bois and rolled them softly along the drives, their whispering of obscenities into each other's ears, their searching to recall the spontaneous dirty practices of their childhood, was but a digression by the way and a tacit gratification of their passions. They felt themselves to be vaguely guilty, as though they had just slightly touched one another; and even this first sin, this languor born of filthy conversations, though it wearied them with a voluptuous fatigue, tickled them yet more sweetly than plain, positive kisses. Their familiarity was thus the slow progress of two lovers, and was inevitably bound to lead them one day to the private room in the Café Riche and to Renée's great pink-and-gray bed. When they found themselves in each other's arms, they did not even feel the shock of sin. One would have thought them two old lovers, whose kisses were full of recollections. And they had

lost so many hours what time their whole beings had been in contact, that in spite of themselves they talked of that past which was full of their unconscious love.

"Do you remember, the day I came to Paris," said Maxime, "what a funny dress you wore? and I drew an angle on your chest with my finger and advised you to cut down the bodice in a point. . . . I felt your skin under your shirt, and my finger went in a little. . . . It was very nice. . . ."

Renée laughed, kissed him and murmured:

"You were nice and vicious already. . . . How you amused us at Worms's, do you remember? We used to call you 'our little toy man.' I always believed that the fat Suzanne would have let you do anything you liked, if the marquise had not watched her with such furious eyes."

"Ah, yes, we had some good laughs . . . ." murmured Maxime. "The photograph album, what? and all the rest, our drives through Paris, our feeds at the pastry-cook's on the boulevard; you know, those little strawberry-tarts you were so fond of? . . . I shall never forget the afternoon when you told me the story of Adeline at the convent, when she wrote letters to Suzanne and signed herself 'Arthur d'Espanet' like a man, and proposed to elope with her. . . ."

The lovers grew merry again over this anecdote; and then Maxime continued in his coaxing voice:

"When you came to fetch me from school in your carriage, how funny we must have looked, you and I. . . . I used to disappear under your skirts, I was so little."

"Yes, yes," she stammered, quivering, and drawing Maxime towards her, "it was very delightful, as you say. . . . We loved one another without knowing it, did we not? I knew it before you did. The other day, driving back from the Bois, I just touched your leg, and I gave a start. . . . But you didn't notice anything. Eh? you were not thinking of me?"

"Oh yes," he replied, somewhat embarrassed. "Only I did not know, you see. . . . I did not dare."

He lied. The idea of possessing Renée had never clearly come to him. He had covered her with all his viciousness, without really desiring her. He was too feeble for such an effort. He accepted Renée because she forced herself upon him, and he had drifted into her bed without willing or foreseeing it. When he had once rolled there, he remained because it was warm, and because he habitually lingered at the bottom of every pit he fell into. At the commencement he even felt the satisfaction of egotism. She was the first married woman he had had. He did not reflect that the husband was his father.

But Renée brought into her sin all the ardour of a heart that has lost caste. She too had glided down the slope. Only she had not rolled to the bottom like a mass of inert flesh. Lust had been kindled within her when it was too late to combat it, and when the fall had become inevitable. This fall abruptly opened up before her as a necessary consequence of her weariness, as a rare and supreme enjoyment which alone was able to rouse her tired senses, her wounded heart. It was during that autumn drive in the twilight, when the Bois was falling asleep, that the vague idea of incest came to her like a titillation that sent an unknown thrill over her skin; and in the evening, in the semi-intoxication of the dinner, lashed by jealousy, this idea became more defined, rose up ardently before her, amid the flames of the conservatory, as she stood before Maxime and Louise. At that moment she craved for sin, the sin that no one commits, the sin that was to fill her empty existence and bring her at last to that hell of which she was still afraid, as in the days when she was a little girl. Then, the next day, through a strange feeling of remorse and lassitude, her craving had left her. It seemed to her that she had already sinned, that it was not so pleasant as she had fancied, and that it would really be too disgusting. The crisis was bound to be a fatal one, to come of itself, without the help of these two beings, these comrades who were destined to deceive themselves one fine evening, to unite in a sexual embrace when they imagined they were shaking hands. But after this stupid fall, she returned

to her dream of a nameless pleasure, and then she took Maxime back to her arms, curious about him, curious as to the cruel delights of a passion which she regarded as a crime. Her volition accepted incest, demanded it, resolved to taste it to the end, even to remorse, should that ever come. She was active and cognizant. She loved with the transports of a woman of fashion, with the restless prejudices of a woman of the middle class, with all the struggles, joys, and disgusts of a woman drowning herself in self-disdain.

Maxime returned every night. He came through the garden at about one o'clock. Oftenest Renée would wait for him in the conservatory, which he must cross to reach the small drawing-room. For the rest they were absolutely shameless, barely hiding themselves, forgetting the most classic precautions of adultery. This corner of the house, it is true, belonged to them. Baptiste, the husband's valet, alone had the right to enter it, and Baptiste, like a serious man, disappeared so soon as his duties were over. Maxime even pretended with a laugh that he withdrew to write his Memoirs. One night, however, just after Maxime had arrived, Renée pointed out Baptiste to him crossing the drawing-room solemnly with a candlestick in his hand. The tall valet, with his diplomatic figure, lit by the yellow light of the taper, wore that night a still more correct and severe expression than usual. Leaning forward, the lovers saw him blow out his candle and go towards the stables, where the horses and grooms lay sleeping.

"He is going his rounds," said Maxime.

Renée stood shivering. Baptiste always made her uncomfortable. She said one day that he was the only respectable man in the house, with his coldness and his clear glances that never alighted on the women's shoulders.

After that they evinced a certain prudence in their meetings. They closed the doors of the small drawing-room and were thus able to dispose of this room, of the conservatory, and of Renée's own rooms in all tranquillity. It was quite a world in itself.

They there tasted, during the earlier months, the most refined, the most daintily sought-out delights. They shifted their love-scenes from the great gray-and-pink bed of the bedroom to the pink-and-white nudity of the dressing-room and to the symphony in yellow-minor of the small drawing-room. Each room with its particular odour, its hangings, its special life, gave them a different form of passion and made of Renée a different inamorata: she was dainty and pretty in her padded patrician couch, where, in the tepid, aristocratic bedchamber, love underwent the modification of good taste; under the flesh-coloured tent, amid the perfume and the humid languor of the bath-room, she became a capricious, carnal courtesan, yielding herself as she left the bath: it was there that Maxime preferred her; then, downstairs, in the bright sunrise of the small drawing-room, in the midst of the yellow halo that gilded her hair, she became a goddess with her fair Diana-like head, her bare arms which assumed chaste postures, her unblemished body which reclined on the couches in attitudes revealing noble outlines of antique grace. But there was one place of which Maxime was almost frightened, where Renée dragged him only on bad days, on days when she needed a more acrid intoxication. Then they loved in the hot-house. It was there that they tasted incest.

One night, in an hour of anguish, Renée sent her lover for one of the black bearskin rugs. Then they lay down on this inky fur, at the edge of a tank, in the large circular pathway. Out of doors it was freezing terribly in the limpid moonlight. Maxime arrived shivering, with frozen ears and fingers. The conservatory was heated to such a point that he swooned away on the bearskin. Coming from the dry, biting cold into so intense a heat, he felt a smarting as though he had been whipped with a birch-rod. When he came to himself, he saw Renée on her knees, leaning over him, with fixed eyes and an animal attitude that alarmed him. Her hair down, her shoulders bare, she leant upon her wrists, with her spine stretched out, like a great cat with phosphorescent eyes. The young man, lying on his back,

perceived above the shoulders of this adorable, amorous beast that gazed upon him the marble sphinx, whose thighs gleamed in the moonlight. Renée had the attitude and the smile of the monster with the woman's head, and, in her loosened petticoats, looked like the white sister of this black divinity.

Maxime remained supine. The heat was suffocating, a sultry heat that did not fall from the sky in a rain of fire, but trailed on the ground like a poisonous effluvium, and its steam ascended like a storm-laden cloud. A warm dampness covered the lovers with dew, with burning sweat. For a long time they remained motionless and speechless in this bath of flame, Maxime prostrate and inert, Renée quivering on her wrists as on supple, nervous hams. From outside, through the little panes of the hot-house, came glimpses of the Parc Monceau, clumps of trees with fine black outlines, lawns white as frozen lakes, a whole dead landscape, the exquisiteness and the light, even tints of which reminded one of bits of Japanese prints. And this spot of burning soil, this inflamed couch on which the lovers lay, seethed strangely in the midst of the great, silent cold.

They passed a night of mad love. Renée was the man, the passionate, active will. Maxime submitted. Smooth-limbed, slim and graceful as a Roman stripling, fair-haired and pretty, stricken in his virility since childhood, this epicene being became a great girl in Renée's inquisitive arms. He seemed born and bred for a perversion of sensual pleasure. Renée enjoyed her domination, and she bent under her passion this creature with the still indeterminate sex. For her it was a continual astonishment of lasciviousness, a surprise of the senses, a bizarre sensation of discomfort and of keen enjoyment. She was no longer certain: she felt doubts each time she returned to his delicate skin, his soft plump neck, his attitudes of abandonment, his fainting-fits. She then experienced an hour of repletion. By revealing to her a new ecstasy, Maxime crowned her mad toilettes, her prodigious luxury, her life of excess. He set in her flesh the top note that was already singing in her ears. He was the lover

who matched the follies and fashions of the period. This pretty little fellow, whose frail figure was revealed by his clothes, this abortive girl, who strolled along the boulevards, his hair parted in the middle, with little bursts of laughter and bored smiles, became in Renée's hands one of those debauching influences of the decadence which at certain periods among rotten nations exhaust a body and unhinge a brain.

And it was in the hot-house especially that Renée played the man. The ardent night they spent there was followed by many others. The hot-house loved and burned with them. In the heavy atmosphere, in the pale light of the moon, they saw the strange world of plants around them moving confusedly and exchanging embraces. The black bearskin stretched across the pathway. At their feet the tank steamed full of a swarm, of a thick tangle, of plants, while the pink petals of the water-lilies opened out on the surface like virgin bodices, and the tornelias let fall their bushy tendrils like the hair of languishing water-nymphs. Around them the palm-trees and the tall Indian bamboos rose up towards the arched roof, where they bent over and mingled their leaves with the staggering attitudes of exhausted lovers. Lower down the ferns, the pterides, the alsophilas, were like green ladies, with ample skirts trimmed with symmetrical flounces, who stood mute and motionless at the edge of the pathway awaiting love. By their side the twisted red-streaked leaves of the begonias and the white spear-headed leaves of the caladiums furnished a vague series of bruises and pallors, which the lovers could not explain to themselves, though at times they discerned curves as of hips and knees, prone on the ground beneath the brutality of ensanguined kisses. And the plaintain-trees, bending under the weight of their fruit, spoke to them of the rich fecundity of the soil, while the Abyssinian euphorbias, of whose prickly, deformed, tapering stems, covered with loathly excrescences, they could catch glimpses in the shadow, seemed to sweat out sap, the overflowing flux of this fiery gestation. But, by degrees, as their glances penetrated into the corners of

the conservatory, the darkness became filled with a more furious debauch of leaves and stalks; they were not able to distinguish on the stages between the marantas, soft as velvet, the gloxinias, purple-belled, the dracœnas resembling blades of old lacquer; it was one round dance of living plants pursuing one another with unsatiated fervour. At the four corners, there where the curtains of creepers closed in the arbours, their carnal fancy grew madder still, and the supple shoots of the vanilla-plants, of the Indian berries, the quisqualias and bauhinias were as the interminable arms of unseen lovers distractedly lengthening their embraces so as to collect all scattered delights. Those endless arms drooped with weariness, entwined in a spasm of love, sought each other, closed up together like a crowd bent on rut. It was the unbounded copulation of the hot-house, of this nook of virgin forest ablaze with tropical flora and foliage.

Maxime and Renée, their senses perverted, felt carried away in these mighty nuptials of the earth. The soil burnt their backs through the bearskin, and drops of heat fell upon them from the lofty palms. The sap that rose in the trunks of the trees penetrated them also, filling them with a mad longing for immediate increase, for gigantic procreation. They joined in the copulation of the hot-house. It was then, in the pale light, that they were stupefied by visions, by nightmares in which they watched at length the intrigues of the ferns and palm-trees; the foliage assumed a confused equivocal aspect, which their desires transformed into sensual images; murmurs and whisperings reached them from the shrubberies, faint voices, sighs of ecstasy, stifled cries of pain, distant laughter, all that was audible in their own embraces, and that was wafted back by the echo. At times they thought themselves shaken by an earthquake, as though the very ground had burst forth into voluptuous sobs in a fit of satisfied desire.

If they had closed their eyes, if the stifling heat and the pale light had not imparted to them a vitiation of every sense, the aromas would have been sufficient to throw them into an extraor-

dinary state of nervous irritation. The tank saturated them with a deep, pungent odour, through which passed the thousand perfumes of the flowers and plants. At times the vanilla-plant sang with dove-like cooings; then came the rough notes of the stanhopeas, whose tigered throats have the strong and putrid breath of the convalescent sick. The orchids, in their baskets suspended by wire chains, emitted their exhalations like living censers. But the dominant scent, the scent in which all these vague breaths were intermingled, was a human scent, a scent of love which Maxime recognized when he kissed Renée in the neck, when he plunged his head into her flowing hair. And they lay intoxicated with this scent of an amorous woman which trailed through the hot-house, as through an alcove in which the earth was reproducing its kind.

As a rule the lovers lay down under the Madagascar tanghin-tree, under that poisoned shrub into one of whose leaves Renée had once bitten. Around them the white statues laughed as they gazed at the mighty copulation of foliage. The moon, as it turned, displaced the groups and gave life to the drama with its changing light. They were a thousand leagues from Paris, far from the easy life of the Bois and official receptions, in a corner of an Indian forest, of some monstrous temple of which the black marble sphinx became the deity. They felt themselves rolling towards crime, towards accursed love, towards the caresses of wild beasts. All the germination that surrounded them, the swarming of the tank, the naked immodesty of the foliage, threw them into the innermost, dantesque inferno of passion. It was then, in the depths of this glass cage, all boiling in the summer heat, lost in the keen December cold, that they relished the flavour of incest, as though it were the criminal fruit of an overheated soil, feeling the while a secret dread of their terrifying couch.

And in the center of the black bearskin, Renée's body seemed whiter, as she crouched like a great cat, her spine stretched out, her wrists tense like supple, nervous hams. She was all swollen with voluptuousness, and the clear outline of her shoulders and

loins stood out with feline distinctness against the splash of ink with which the rug blackened the yellow sand of the pathway. She gloated over Maxime, this prey extended beneath her, abandoning itself, which she possessed entirely. And from time to time she leant forward abruptly and kissed him with her chafed mouth. Her mouth opened then with the hungry, bleeding brilliancy of the Chinese hibiscus, whose expanse covered the wall of the house. She became a sheer burning daughter of the hothouse. Her kisses bloomed and faded like the red flowers of the great mallow, which last scarcely a few hours and are unceasingly renewed, like the bruised, insatiable lips of a colossal Messalina.

CHAPTER V

Saccard was haunted by the thought of the kiss he had pressed upon his wife's neck. He had long ceased to avail himself of his marital rights; the rupture had come naturally, neither one nor the other caring about a connection which inconvenienced them. Saccard would never think of returning to Renée's chamber, if some good piece of business were not the ultimate aim of his conjugal devotion.

The lucky speculation at Charonne progressed favourably, although he was still anxious as to its termination. Larsonneau, with his dazzling shirt-front, had a way of smiling which he did not like. He was no more than an intermediary, a man of straw, whose assistance he paid for by allowing him a commission of ten per cent. on the ultimate profits. But although the expropriation-agent had not paid a sou into the enterprise, and Saccard had not only found the money for the music-hall but taken every precaution, a deed of retrocession, undated letters, antedated receipts, the latter none the less felt an inward fear, a presentiment of some treachery. He suspected his accomplice of an intention to blackmail him by means of the false inventory which he had preciously preserved and which alone he had to thank for his share in the business.

So the two fellows shook one another vigorously by the hand. Larsonneau addressed Saccard as "dear master." At bottom he had a real admiration for this acrobat, and watched his performances on the tight-rope of speculation with the eye of a connoisseur. The idea of taking him in tickled him as a rare and pungent voluptuousness. He nursed a plan, as yet vague, not knowing how to make use of the weapon he possessed, lest he should do himself a damage with it. He felt beside that he was at his former colleague's mercy. The ground and the buildings, which

the cunningly-prepared inventories already estimated at closely two millions although not worth a quarter of that amount, must end by being swallowed up in a colossal smash, if the fairy of expropriation failed to touch them with her golden wand. According to the original plans which they had been able to consult, the new boulevard, opened to connect the artillery-park of Vincennes with the Prince-Eugène Barracks, and to bring the guns into the heart of Paris, while avoiding the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, cut off a part of the ground; but there still remained the danger that this would be only just grazed, and that the ingenious speculation might fall through by reason of its very shamelessness. In that case Larsonneau would be left stranded with a delicate adventure on his hands. Still, despite the inferior part he was compelled to play, this danger did not prevent him from feeling disgusted when he thought of the paltry ten per cent. which he was to pocket in this colossal robbery of millions. And at these moments he could not resist a furious longing to stretch out his hand and carve out a slice for himself.

Saccard had not even permitted him to lend money to his wife; he took pleasure himself in this crass piece of theatrical trickery, which delighted his weakness for complicated transactions.

"No, no, my dear fellow," he said, with his Provençal accent, which he exaggerated whenever he wished to add zest to a joke, "don't let us mix up our accounts. . . . You are the only man in Paris whom I have sworn never to owe any money to."

Larsonneau contented himself with telling him that his wife was a sink. He advised him not to give her another sou, so that she might be compelled to make over the property to them at once. He would have preferred to have had business with Saccard alone. He tried him occasionally, and carried things so far as to say to him, with his languid and indifferent man-about-town manner:

"All the same, I shall have to put my papers in order a bit. . . . Your wife frightens me, old man. I don't want to have certain documents at my office attached."

Saccard was not the man to submit patiently to hints of this kind, especially as he was well acquainted with the cold and fastidious orderliness that prevailed in this individual's office. All his active, cunning little being revolted against the terror with which this great coxcomb of a yellow-gloved usurer sought to inspire him. The worst was that he felt seized with shudders when he thought of the possibility of a scandal; and he saw himself remorselessly exiled by his brother and living in Belgium by some shabby little trade. One day he grew angry and went so far as to address Larsonneau in the second person singular.

"Look here, my boy," he said, "you're a decent chap, but it would be just as well if you gave up the document you know of. You'll see that bit of paper will end by making us quarrel."

The other feigned astonishment, pressed his "dear master's" hands, and assured him of his devotion. Saccard regretted his momentary impatience. It was at this period that he began to think seriously of resuming relations with his wife; he might have need of her against his accomplice, and he, moreover, said to himself that business matters are wonderfully easy to talk over with one's head on the pillow. That kiss on the neck tended little by little to reveal an entirely new policy.

However, he was in no hurry, he husbanded his resources. He devoted the whole winter to ripening his plan, bothered by a hundred affairs, one more involved than the other. It was a horrible winter for him, full of shocks, a prodigious campaign, during which he had daily to vanquish bankruptcy. Far from cutting down his domestic expenses, he gave entertainment upon entertainment. But if he successfully faced every obstacle, he was compelled to neglect Renée, whom he reserved for a triumphant stroke when the Charonne operation became ripe. He contented himself with preparing the catastrophe by continuing to give her no money except by the intermediary of Larsonneau. When he had a few thousand francs lying idle, and she complained of her poverty, he brought them to her, saying that Larsonneau's people required a note of hand for twice the amount. This farce amused

him enormously, the story of those promissory notes delighted him because of the air of romance they imparted to the affair. Even at the period of his clearest profits he had served out his wife's income in a very irregular fashion, making her princely presents, throwing her handfuls of bank-notes, and then for weeks leaving her in the lurch for a paltry amount. Now that he found himself seriously embarrassed, he spoke of the household expenses, he treated her as a creditor to whom one is unwilling to confess one's ruin, gaining time by making excuses. She barely listened to him; she signed anything he asked; she only pitied herself for not being able to sign more.

Already, however, he held two hundred thousand francs' worth of her promissory notes, which cost him barely one hundred and ten thousand francs. After having these notes endorsed by Larsonneau, in whose favour they were made out, he put them in circulation in a prudent manner, intending to employ them as decisive weapons later on. He would never have been able to hold out to the end of that terrible winter, lending money to his wife at usury and keeping up his household expenses, but for the sale of his building-plots on the Boulevard Malesherbes, which the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier bought of him for cash down, deducting, however, a formidable discount.

For Renée this same winter was a long joy. She suffered only from the want of ready money. Maxime proved a great expense; he still treated her as his stepmother, and allowed her to pay wherever they went. But this secret poverty was for her a delight the more. She taxed her ingenuity and racked her brains so that "her dear child" should want for nothing; and when she had persuaded her husband to find her a few thousand francs, she ran through them with her lover in costly frivolities like two schoolboys let out on their first escapade. When they had spent the last sou, they remained at home, they revelled in the great piece of masonry built with such new and such insolently meaningless luxury. The father was never there. The lovers sat by the fireside more often than formerly. The fact was that Renée had

at last filled the icy emptiness of those gilded ceilings with a warm joy. The disorderly house of worldly pleasure had become a chapel in which she secretly practised a new religion. Maxime did not merely strike in her the shrill note that matched her extravagant costumes; he was the lover fashioned for this house, with its windows wide as shop-windows and its flow of sculpture from garret to base; he gave life to all this plaster, from the two chubby Cupids who in the courtyard let flow a sheet of water from their shell to the great naked women who supported the balconies and played with apples and ears of corn amid the pediments; he gave a meaning to the over-decorated hall, the circumscribed garden, the dazzling rooms in which one saw too many arm-chairs and no single work of art. Renée, who had bored herself to death in this house, began suddenly to take pleasure in it, using it as she might use a thing whose purpose she had not at first understood. And it was not only in her own rooms, in the buttercup drawing-room, and in the hot-house that she carried her love, but through the whole house. She even ended by finding pleasure in lying on the divan in the smoking-room; she lingered there, saying that the room had a vague and very agreeable smell of tobacco.

She had two days every week now instead of one. On Thursdays any called who pleased. But Mondays were reserved to bosom friends. Men were excluded. Maxime alone was admitted to these select gatherings, which took place in the small drawing-room. One evening she conceived the amazing idea of dressing him up as a woman and introducing him as her cousin. Adeline, Suzanne, Baronne Meinhold, and the other ladies present rose and bowed, astonished at this face, which they vaguely recognized. Then, when they understood, they laughed a great deal, they absolutely refused to let the young man go and undress. They kept him with them in his skirts, teasing him and permitting themselves equivocal pleasantries. When he had seen these ladies out by the front door, he went round the gardens and returned by the conservatory. Renée's dear friends never had the slightest sus-

picion of the truth. The lovers could not be more familiar than they already were when they used to declare themselves boon companions. And if a servant happened to see them pressing rather close together, in the doorways, he felt no surprise, being accustomed to the frolicsomeness of madame and of the son of monsieur.

This complete sense of liberty and impunity made them still bolder. They fastened the door at night, but in the daytime they embraced in every room in the house. On rainy days they invented a thousand little pastimes. But Renée's great delight still was to heap up a tremendous fire and doze away before the grate. Her linen was marvellously luxurious that winter. She wore chemises and wrappers of ruinous costliness, whose cambric and lace insertions barely covered her with a cloud of white smoke. And in the red glow of the firelight she lay as though naked, with rosy lace and skin, the heat penetrating through the thin stuff to her flesh. Maxime, crouched at her feet, kissed her knees without even feeling the cambric, which had the warmth and colour of that beautiful body. The daylight was not fully admitted, it fell like a twilight into the gray silk room, while Céleste behind them went to and fro with her quiet step. She had become their accomplice, quite naturally. One morning when they had forgotten themselves in bed, she found them there and retained the impassiveness of her cold-blooded, servant-maid's nature. They then ceased to restrain themselves, she came in at all hours without the sound of their kisses causing her to turn her head. They relied on her to warn them in case of danger. They did not purchase her silence. She was a very economical, very good girl, and had never been known to have a lover.

However, Renée had not encloistered herself. Taking Maxime in her train, like a fair-haired page in dress-clothes, she threw herself into society, where she tasted even keener pleasures. The season was a long triumph for her. Never had she imagined bolder toilettes or head-dresses. It was then that she had the courage to wear that famous gown of forest-coloured satin on

which was embroidered a complete stag-hunt with its accessories, powder-flasks, hunting-horns, big-bladed knives. It was then also that she set the fashion of dressing the hair in the classical style; Maxime was sent to make sketches for her in the Musée Campana, which had been recently opened. She grew younger, she was at the acme of her turbulent beauty. Incest lent her a fire that glowed in the depths of her eyes and warmed her laughter. Her eye-glass looked supremely insolent at the tip of her nose, and she glanced at the other women, at the dear friends pluming themselves upon the enormity of some vice or other, with the air of a boastful boy, with a fixed smile that said: "I have my crime."

Maxime for his part considered society tedious to a degree. It was to seem "smart" that he pretended to bore himself there, for he did not really amuse himself anywhere. At the Tuileries, at the ministers' houses, he disappeared behind Renée's skirts. But he resumed the reins so soon as there was a question of some escapade. Renée wanted to see the private-room on the boulevard again, and the width of the sofa made her smile. Then he took her to all sorts of places, to the houses of fast women, to the opera-balls, to the stage-boxes of the burlesque theatres, to every equivocal place where they could rub shoulders with animal vice and taste the delights of their incognito. When they stealthily returned home, worn out with fatigue, they fell asleep in each other's arms, sleeping off the intoxication of obscene Paris, with snatches of ribald couplets still singing in their ears. The next day Maxime imitated the actors, and Renée, seated at the piano in the small drawing-room, endeavoured to reproduce the raucous voice and jaunty attitudes of Blanche Muller as la Belle Hélène. Her convent music-lessons now only assisted her to murder the verses of the new burlesques. She had a holy horror of serious airs. Maxime "humbugged" German music with her, and he felt it his duty to go and hiss *Tannhäuser* both by conviction and in defence of his stepmother's sprightly refrains.

One of their great delights was skating; that winter skating

was fashionable, the Emperor having been one of the first to try the ice on the lake in the Bois de Boulogne. Renée ordered a complete Polish suit of Worms, in velvet and fur; she made Maxime wear doeskin boots and a foxskin cap. They reached the Bois in an intense cold which stung their lips and noses as though the wind had blown fine sand into their faces. It amused them to feel cold. The Bois was quite gray, with snow threading the branches with narrow strips of lace. And under the pale sky, above the congealed and dimmed lake, only the fir-trees on the islands still displayed, on the edge of the horizon, their theatrical drapery, on which also the snow had stitched broad bands of lace. They darted along together through the icy air, with the rapid flight of swallows skimming the ground. With one hand carried behind their backs and one upon each other's shoulders, they went off erect, smiling, side by side, turning on themselves, in the wide space marked out by thick ropes. The sightseers stared at them from the roadway. From time to time they came and warmed themselves at the braziers lighted at the edge of the lake. They shot off again. They enlarged the circle of their flight, their eyes watering with pleasure and with cold.

Then, when springtime came, Renée recalled her old sentimental ideas. She made Maxime stroll with her at night in the Parc Monceau in the moonlight. They went into the grotto, and sat down on the grass in front of the colonnade. But when she evinced a desire for a row on the little lake, they found that the boat they saw from the house, moored at the edge of a pathway, was without oars. These were evidently removed at night. This was a disappointment. Moreover, the great shadows of the gardens disquieted the lovers. They would have liked a Venetian fête to be given there, with red lanterns and a band. They preferred it in the daytime, in the afternoon, and often they stationed themselves at one of the windows of the house to watch the carriages following the graceful curve of the main avenue. They enjoyed looking at this charming corner of new Paris, this clean, smiling bit of nature, these lawns like skirts of velvet,

figured with flower-beds and choice shrubs, and bordered with magnificent white roses. Carriages passed by one another, as numerous as on the boulevards; the ladies on foot trailed their skirts languorously, as though they had not lifted a foot from the carpets of their drawing-rooms. And they criticized the dresses across the foliage, pointed to the horses, taking a genuine pleasure in the soft colours of this great garden. A scrap of gilded railing flashed between two trees, a flock of ducks swam across the lake, the little Renaissance bridge stood out white and new amid the foliage, while on either side of the big avenue, mothers, seated on yellow chairs, chatted and forgot the little boys and girls who looked at each other prettily, with the graces of precocious children.

The lovers doted on new Paris. They often drove through the town, going out of their way so as to pass along certain boulevards which they loved with a personal affection. The tall houses, with their great carved doors, their heavy balconies, with, in great gold letters, names, signs, names of firms, delighted them. As the brougham rolled on, they followed with a friendly glance the gray bands of wide, interminable pavement, with its seats, its variegated columns, its exiguous trees. This bright gap, which ran to the limit of the horizon, growing narrower, and opening upon a pale-blue square of space, this uninterrupted two-fold row of great shops, where the shopmen smiled upon their fair customers, these currents of stamping, swarming crowds filled them little by little with an absolute and entire contentment, with a feeling of perfection in the life of the streets. They loved even the jets of the watering-hose, which passed like white vapour before their horses, spreading out and falling like fine rain under the wheels of the brougham, darkening the ground, and raising a light cloud of dust. They rolled on, and it seemed to them that the carriage was rolling over carpets along that straight, endless roadway, which had been made solely to save them from the dark back-streets. Every boulevard became a lobby of their house. The gay sunshine smiled upon the new

façades, lit up the window-panes, fell upon the awnings of the shops and cafés, and heated the asphalt beneath the busy footsteps of the crowd. And when they returned home, a little confused by the dazzling hubbub of these long bazaars, they found relief in the contemplation of the Parc Monceau, which was the natural border of this new Paris which displayed its luxury in the first warmth of spring.

When fashion absolutely forced them to leave Paris, they went to the seaside, but regretfully, dreaming of the boulevard pavements while on the shores of the ocean. Their love itself faded there. It was a flower of the hot-house that needed the great gray-and-pink bed, the naked flesh of the dressing-room, the gilded dawn of the small drawing-room. Alone in the evenings, in front of the sea, they no longer found anything to say to each other. Renée tried to sing her collection of songs from the Théâtre des Variétés at an old piano that was at its last gasp in a corner of her room at the hotel; but the instrument, damp with the breezes from the open, had the melancholy voice of the great waters. *La Belle Hélène* sounded fantastic and lugubrious, Renée consoled herself by astonishing the people on the beach with her wonderful costumes. All her crowd of ladies was there, yawning, waiting for winter, casting about in despair for a bathing-dress that would not make them look too ugly. Renée could never prevail on Maxime to bathe. He was horribly frightened of the water, turned quite pale when the tide rose up to his boots, and for nothing in the world would have approached the edge of a cliff; he kept away from the sand-holes, and made long circuits to avoid the least bit of steep beach.

Saccard came down once or twice to see "the children." He was overwhelmed with worry, he said. It was not until October, when they were all three back in Paris, that he thought seriously of effecting a reconciliation with his wife. The Charonne affair was ripening. His plan was a simple and a brutal one. He proposed to capture Renée by the same trick that he would have practised upon a strumpet. She was living

amid an increasing need of money, and was too proud to apply to her husband save as a last resource. The latter resolved to take advantage of her first request for money to play the gallant, and to resume the long-severed relations in the delight brought about by the payment of some big debt.

Terrible embarrassments awaited Renée and Maxime in Paris. Several of the promissory notes made out to Larsonneau were overdue; but as Saccard naturally left them slumbering at the lawyer's, they did not cause the young wife much uneasiness. She was far more alarmed by her debt to Worms, which now amounted to nearly two hundred thousand francs. The tailor insisted on a payment on account, and threatened to stop her credit. She shuddered keenly when she thought of the scandal of a law-suit, and above all of a quarrel with the illustrious dressmaker. Moreover, she was in need of pocket-money. They would be bored to death, Maxime and she, without a few louis a day to spend. The dear child was quite without resources since he had begun to rummage his father's drawers in vain. His fidelity, his exemplary behaviour during the last seven or eight months, were largely due to the absolute emptiness of his purse. He rarely had twenty francs with which to take a poll out to supper. And so he philosophically returned to the house. Renée, on each of their escapades, handed him her purse so that he might pay at the restaurants, at the balls, and at the boulevard theatres. She continued to treat him as a mother; and she even paid, with the tips of her gloved fingers, at the pastry-cook's, where they got out almost every afternoon to eat little oyster patties. In the morning he often found in his waistcoat a few louis which he did not know he had, and which she had put there, like a mother filling a schoolboy's pockets. And to think that this charming life of odd snacks, of contented caprices and of facile pleasures was to cease! But a still greater dread came to terrify them. Sylvia's jeweller, to whom Maxime owed ten thousand francs, grew angry and talked of Clichy. The costs had so accumulated on the acceptances which

he held in hand and had long protested, that the debt had increased by some three or four thousand francs. Saccard plainly declared that he could do nothing. To have his son sent to Clichy would look well, and when he took him out he would make a great fuss about his paternal liberality. Renée was in despair; she beheld her dear child in prison, in a veritable dungeon, lying on damp straw. One night she seriously proposed to him not to leave her again, to live there unknown to everyone, and sheltered from the bailiff's men. Then she swore she would find the money. She never spoke of the origin of the debt, of that Sylvia who confided her amours to the mirrors of private rooms. She wanted about fifty thousand francs, fifteen thousand for Maxime, thirty thousand for Worms, and five thousand for pocket-money. Then they would have a long fortnight's happiness before them. She embarked on her campaign.

Her first idea was to ask her husband for the fifty thousand francs. She did not decide to do so without some repugnance. The last time he came to her room to bring her money, he had pressed fresh kisses on her neck, and had taken her hands and talked of his affection. Women have a very subtle sense that enables them to guess men's feelings. And so she was prepared for a demand, for a tacit bargain clinched with a smile. And indeed, when she asked him for the fifty thousand francs, he protested, exclaimed that Larsonneau would never lend such an amount as that, that he himself was still too much embarrassed. Then, changing his voice, as though conquered and seized with sudden emotion:

"One can refuse you nothing," he murmured. "I will trot about Paris and accomplish the impossible. . . . I want you to be happy, my dear."

And putting his lips to her ear, kissing her hair, his voice trembling a little:

"I will bring it to you to-morrow evening, in your room . . . without any promissory note . . ."

But she interrupted hastily that she was in no hurry, that she

did not want to trouble him to do that. Saccard, who had just thrown all his heart into that dangerous "without any promissory note," which he had allowed to slip out and which he regretted, pretended not to have received a disagreeable rebuff. He rose, and said:

"Well, I am at your disposal . . . I will get the money for you when you want it. Larsonneau will have nothing to do with it, you know. It's a present I want to make you."

He smiled good-naturedly. Renée remained in a state of cruel anguish. She felt that she would lose the little equilibrium left her, if she gave herself to her husband. Her last pride was that she was married to the father but was the wife of the son alone. Often, when Maxime seemed cold to her, she endeavoured by very plain allusions to make him grasp this situation; it must be confessed that the young man, whom she expected to see fall at her feet after this revelation, remained perfectly indifferent, thinking doubtless that she was trying to reassure him as to the possibility of a meeting between his father and himself in the gray silk room.

When Saccard had left her, she impetuously dressed herself, and had the horses put to. While her brougham was conveying her to the Île Saint-Louis, she rehearsed the manner in which she would ask her father for the fifty thousand francs. She flung herself into this sudden idea without consenting to discuss it, feeling a great coward at heart, and seized with invincible fright at the thought of the step she was taking. When she arrived, the courtyard of the Hôtel Béraud froze her with its dreary, cloistral dampness, and she felt a longing to run away as she climbed the broad stone staircase, on which her little high-heeled boots rang out ominously. She had been foolish enough in her hurry to choose a costume of feuillemort silk, with long flounces of white lace, trimmed with bows of satin, and cut crosswise by a plaited sash. This dress, which was finished off with a little flat toque with a large white veil, struck so singular a note in the dark gloom of the staircase that she herself became

conscious of the strange figure she cut there. She trembled as she traversed the austere array of huge rooms, in which the vague figures of the tapestry seemed surprised at the sight of this flow of skirts passing through the twilight of their solitude.

She found her father in a drawing-room looking out upon the court-yard, where he habitually sat. He was reading a large book placed on a desk fastened to the arms of his chair. Before one of the windows sat Aunt Elisabeth knitting with long wooden needles; and in the silence of the room the tick-tack of those needles was the only sound heard.

Renée sat down, ill at ease, unable to move without disturbing the severity of the lofty ceiling with a noise of rustling silk. Her lace looked a crude white against the dark background of tapestry and old-fashioned furniture. M. Béraud du Châtel gazed at her with his hands resting on the edge of his reading-desk. Aunt Elisabeth spoke of the approaching wedding of Christine, who was about to marry the son of a very well-to-do attorney; she had gone shopping with an old family-servant; and the good aunt talked on all by herself, in her placid voice, knitting unceasingly, gossiping about her household affairs, and casting smiling glances at Renée over her spectacles.

But Renée became more and more uneasy. The silence of the whole house weighed upon her shoulders, and she would have given much for the lace of her dress to have been black. Her father's look made her so uncomfortable that she considered Worms really ridiculous to have thought of such wide flounces.

"How smart you look, my girl!" said Aunt Elisabeth, suddenly. She had not even noticed her niece's lace before.

She stopped her needles, and adjusted her spectacles, in order to see better. M. Béraud du Châtel gave a faint smile.

"It is rather white," he said. "A woman must feel very uncomfortable in that on the pavements."

"But, father, we don't go out on foot!" cried Renée, who immediately regretted this ingenuous utterance.

The old man made as though to reply. Then he rose, drew

up his tall stature, and walked slowly up and down, without giving his daughter another look. The latter remained quite pale with trepidation. Every time she exhorted herself to take courage, and sought a transition in order to lead up to her request for money, she felt a twitching at her heart.

"We never see you now, father," she complained.

"Oh!" replied the aunt, without giving her brother time to open his lips, "your father never goes out, except very rarely to go to the Jardin des Plantes. And I have to grow angry with him before he will do that! He maintains that he loses himself in Paris, that the town is no longer fit for him. . . . Ah, you would do well to scold him!"

"My husband would be so pleased to see you at our Thursdays from time to time," continued Renée.

M. Béraud du Châtel took a few steps in silence. Then in a quiet voice:

"Thank your husband for me," he said. "He seems to be an energetic fellow, and I hope for your sake that he conducts his business honestly. But our ideas are not the same, and I do not feel comfortable in your fine house in the Parc Monceau."

Aunt Elisabeth seemed vexed by this reply:

"How perverse you men are with your politics!" she said merrily. "Shall I tell you the truth? Your father is furious with both of you because you go to the Tuileries."

But the old man shrugged his shoulders, as though to imply that his dissatisfaction had much more serious causes. He thoughtfully resumed his slow walk. Renée was silent for a moment, with the request for the fifty thousand francs on the tip of her tongue. Then she was seized with a greater fit of cowardice, kissed her father, and went away.

Aunt Elisabeth accompanied her to the staircase. As they crossed the suite of rooms, she continued to chatter in her thin, old voice:

"You are happy, dear child. I am so pleased to see you looking well and handsome; for if your marriage had turned out

badly, you know, I should have thought myself to blame. . . . Your husband loves you, you have all you want, have you not? "

"Of course," replied Renée, forcing herself to smile, though feeling sick at heart.

The aunt still detained her, her hand on the balustrade of the staircase.

"You see, I have only one fear, lest you should lose your head with all this happiness. Be prudent, and above all sell none of your property. . . . If one day you had a baby, you would have a little fortune all ready for it."

When Renée was back in her brougham, she heaved a sigh of relief. Drops of cold sweat stood on her temples; she wiped them off, thinking of the icy dampness of the Hôtel Béraud. Then, when the brougham rolled into the bright sunshine of the Quai Saint-Paul, she remembered the fifty thousand francs, and all her suffering was revived, more poignant than before. She who was considered so audacious, what a coward she had just been! And yet it was a question of Maxime, of his liberty, of their mutual joys! Amid the bitter reproaches which she heaped upon herself, an idea suddenly occurred to her that put the finishing touch to her despair: she ought to have spoken of the fifty thousand francs to her Aunt Elisabeth on the stairs. What had she been thinking of? The kind woman would perhaps have lent her the money, or at least have helped her. She was leaning forward to tell her coachman to drive back to the Rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île, when she thought she again saw the image of her father slowly crossing the solemn darkness of the big drawing-room. She would never have the courage to return immediately to that room. What should she say to explain this second visit? And, at the bottom of her heart, she felt she had no longer even the courage to mention the matter to Aunt Elisabeth. She told her coachman to drive her to the Rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière.

Mme. Sidonie uttered a cry of delight when she saw her opening the discreetly-curtained door of the shop. She was there by

accident, she was just going out to run to the court where she was suing a customer. But she would let judgment go by default, she would try again another day; she was so happy that her sister-in-law had had the kindness to pay her a little visit at last. Renée smiled with an air of embarrassment. Mme. Sidonie positively refused to allow her to stay downstairs; she took her up to her room, by way of the little staircase, after removing the brass knob from the shop-door. She removed and replaced this knob, which was held by a single nail, twenty times a day.

"There, my beauty," she said, making her sit down on a long-chair, "now we can have a nice chat. . . . Just fancy, you came in the nick of time. I was coming to see you this evening."

Renée, who knew the room, experienced that indefinite feeling of uneasiness which a traveller feels on finding that a strip of timber has been felled in a favourite landscape.

"Ah," she said at last, "you've moved the bed, have you not?"

"Yes," the lace-dealer replied, quietly, "one of my customers prefers it facing the mantelpiece. It was she too who advised me to have red curtains."

"That's what I was thinking, the curtains used not to be red. . . . A very common colour, red."

And she put up her eye-glass, and looked round this room that displayed the luxury of a big furnished hotel. On the mantelshelf she saw some long hair-pins which had certainly not come from Mme. Sidonie's meagre chignon. In the place where the bed used to stand, the wall-paper was all torn, discoloured, and soiled by the mattresses. The business-woman had indeed endeavoured to hide this eyesore behind the back of two arm-chairs: but these backs were rather low, and Renée's eyes became fixed on this worn strip of paper.

"Have you something to tell me?" she asked.

"Yes, it's a whole story," said Mme. Sidonie, folding her hands, with the mien of a gastronome who is about to describe

what she has had for dinner. "Just think, M. de Saffré has fallen in love with the beautiful Madame Saccard. . . . Yes, with your pretty self."

Renée did not even make a coquettish gesture.

"Why," said she, "you said he was so smitten with Mme. Michelin."

"Oh, that's all over, over and done with . . . I can prove it to you if you like . . . haven't you heard that the little Michelin has attracted the Baron Gouraud? It's inconceivable. All who know the baron are astounded. . . . And now, you know, she is on the way to obtain the red riband for her husband! . . . Ah, she's a clever woman that. She knows her way about, you can't teach her anything!"

She said this with an air of admiration not unmingled with regret.

"But to return to M. de Saffré. . . . He seems to have met you at an actresses' ball, muffled up in a domino, and he even accuses himself of having rather cavalierly asked you to supper. . . . Is it true?"

The younger woman was quite surprised.

"Perfectly true," she murmured; "but who could have told him?"

"Wait, he says that he recognized you later on, after you had left the room, and that he remembered seeing you go out on Maxime's arm. . . . Since that time he has been madly in love with you. It has sprouted up in his heart, don't you see? a fancy. . . . He has been to see me, to beseech me to make you his apologies . . ."

"Well, tell him I forgive him," interrupted Renée, carelessly.

Then, all her anguish returning, she went on:

"Ah, my kind Sidonie, I am terribly worried. I must positively have fifty thousand francs to-morrow morning. I came to talk to you about this. You know people who lend money, you told me."

The woman of business, offended at the abrupt way in which her sister-in-law broke up her recital, made her wait some time for an answer.

"Yes, certainly, only I advise you first of all to look about among your friends. . . . Were I in your place I know very well what I should do. . . . I should just simply apply to M. de Saffré."

Renée gave a constrained smile.

"But," she retorted, "that would be hardly proper, considering you pretend that he is so much in love."

The old woman looked at her with a stare; then her flaccid face melted gently into a smile of affectionate pity.

"You poor dear," she murmured, "you've been crying; don't deny it, I can see it by your eyes. You must be brave and take life as it comes. . . . Now then, let me arrange this little matter for you."

Renée rose, twisting her fingers, making her gloves crack. And she remained standing, completely shaken by a cruel inner struggle. She opened her lips, to accept perhaps, when suddenly the bell rang lightly in the next room. Mme. Sidonie hastily went out, leaving the door ajar, which showed a double row of pianos. Renée next heard a man's step and the stifled sound of a conversation carried on in an undertone. She mechanically went and examined more closely the yellow streak with which the mattresses had stained the wall. This stain disturbed her, made her feel uncomfortable. Forgetting everything, Maxime, the fifty thousand francs, M. de Saffré, she returned to the side of the bed, reflecting: that bed looked much better placed as it used to be; some women really had no taste; surely, if you went to bed like that, you would have the light in your eyes. And vaguely, in the depths of her memory she saw rising the image of the stranger of the Quai Saint-Paul, her romance in two assignations, that chance amour which she had indulged over there, where the bed used to stand. The wearing away of the wall-paper was all that remained of it. Then the room

filled her with uneasiness, and she lost patience with the hum of voices that still went on in the adjoining room.

When Mme. Sidonie returned, circumspectly, opening and closing the door, she made repeated signs with her fingers to induce Renée to speak very low. Then, in her ear:

"You have no idea, this is most fortunate: it is M. de Saffré who has called."

"You haven't told him, surely, that I was here?" asked Renée, uneasily.

The woman of business seemed surprised, and very innocently answered:

"I did indeed. . . . He is waiting for me to tell him to come in. Of course, I said nothing to him of the fifty thousand francs. . . ."

Renée, very pale, had drawn herself up as though struck with a whip. An infinite pride rose to her heart. The rude creaking of boots which she now heard more distinctly in the room next door, exasperated her.

"I am going," she said, curtly. "Come and open the door for me."

Mme. Sidonie tried to smile.

"Don't be childish. . . . I can't be left with that lad on my hands, now that I've told him you are here. . . . You compromise me, really. . . ."

But Renée had already descended the little staircase. She repeated before the closed shop-door:

"Open it, open it."

The lace-dealer had a habit of putting the brass knob in her pocket after she had withdrawn it from the door. She wanted to continue arguing. At last, seized with anger herself, and displaying in the depths of her gray eyes, the sour barrenness of her nature, she cried:

"But what on earth do you want me to tell the man?"

"That I'm not for sale," replied Renée, with one foot on the pavement.

And it seemed to her that she heard Madame Sidonie mutter, as she banged the door to: "Ah, get out, you jade! you shall pay me for this."

"My God!" thought she, as she stepped into her brougham, "I prefer my husband to that."

She drove straight back home. After dinner she asked Maxime not to come; she was unwell, she needed rest. And the next day, when she handed him the fifteen thousand francs for Sylvia's jeweller, she was embarrassed in the midst of his surprise and his questions. Her husband, she said, had had a good stroke of business. But from that day forward she was more wayward, she frequently changed the hour of the appointments she gave Maxime, and often even watched for him in the conservatory to send him away. He did not trouble much about these changes of mood; he took pleasure in being an obedient thing in the hands of women. What more annoyed him was the moral turn which their lovers'-meetings took at times. She became quite dismal; and it even happened that she had great tears in her eyes. She left off her refrain of "le beau jeune homme" in *La Belle Hélène,* played the hymns she had learnt at school, asked her lover if he did not think that sin was punished sooner or later.

"There is no doubt she's growing old," thought he. "It will be the utmost if she's amusing for another year or two."

The truth was that she was suffering cruelly. She would now have preferred to deceive Maxime with M. de Saffré. At Madame Sidonie's she had revolted, she had yielded to instinctive pride, to disgust for that coarse bargain. But on the following days, when she endured the anguish of adultery, everything within her foundered, and she felt herself to be so contemptible that she would have given herself to the first man that pushed open the door of the room with the pianos. Up to then, the thought of her husband had sometimes passed before her, in her incest, like a voluptuous accentuation of horror,

but now the husband, the man himself, entered into it with a brutality that changed her most delicate sensations into intolerable pain. She, who found pleasure in the refinement of her sin, and who dreamt gladly of a corner of a superhuman paradise where the gods enjoyed their own kindred, was now drifting towards vulgar debauchery, and making herself the common property of two men. In vain did she endeavour to derive enjoyment from her infamy. Her lips were still warm with Saccard's kisses when she offered them to Maxime. Her curiosity penetrated to the depth of those accursed enjoyments; she went so far as to mingle the two affections, and to seek for the son in the embraces of the father. And she emerged yet more scared, more bruised from this journey into the unknown regions of sin, from this ardent darkness in which she confused her twofold lovers, with terrors that were as the death-rattle of her joys.

She kept this tragedy for herself alone, and redoubled its anguish by the fever of her imagination. She would have died rather than confess the truth to Maxime. She had an inward fear lest the young man might revolt and leave her; above all she had so absolute a belief in the monstrousness of her sin and the eternity of her damnation, that she would rather have crossed the Parc Monceau naked than have confessed her shame in a whisper. On the other hand, she still remained the scatter-brain who astonished Paris with her eccentricities. Nervous gaiety seized hold of her, prodigious caprices, which were discussed in the newspapers with her name disguised under initials. It was at this period that she seriously wanted to fight a duel, with pistols, with the Duchesse de Sternich, who had purposely, she said, upset a glass of punch over her gown; her brother-in-law, the minister, had to speak angrily to her before she would relinquish her idea. On another occasion she bet Madame de Lauwerens that she could run round the track at Longchamps in less than ten minutes, and it was only a question of costume

that deterred her. Maxime himself began to be frightened of this head in which madness was shooting up, and in which he thought he could hear, at night, on the pillow, all the hubbub of a city on heat for enjoyment.

One night they went together to the Théâtre-Italien. They had not even looked at the bill. They wanted to see a great Italian actress, Ristori, who was at that time being run after by all Paris, and who was so much in fashion that they were forced to take an interest in her. The play was *Phèdre*. He remembered his classical repertory sufficiently well, and she knew enough Italian, to follow the performance. And this tragedy even gave them a special emotion, played in this foreign language whose sonorousness seemed to them at times to be a simple orchestral accompaniment to the pantomime of the actors. The Hippolyte was a tall, pale fellow, a very poor actor, who wept through his part.

"What an ass!" muttered Maxime.

But Ristori, with her broad shoulders shaken by sobs, with her tragic features and large arms, moved Renée profoundly. Phèdre was of Pasiphaé's blood, and she asked herself of whose blood she could be, she, the incestuous one of modern time. And she saw nothing of the piece save this tall woman dragging across the stage the crime of antiquity. In the first act, when Phèdre confides her criminal affection to Œnone; in the second when, all burning, she declares herself to Hippolyte; and later, in the fourth act, when the return of Thésée overwhelms her, and she curses herself, in a crisis of sombre fury, she filled the house with such a cry of savage passion, with so great a yearning for superhuman voluptuousness, that Renée felt every shudder of her desire and of her remorse pass through her own flesh.

"Wait," whispered Maxime in her ear, "you will hear Théramène tell his story. What an old fat-head!"

And he muttered in a hollow voice:

"Scarce had we issued forth from Trœzen's gates,
"He on his chariot . . ."

But while the old man spoke, Renée had neither eyes nor ears. The light from the roof blinded her, a stifling heat came to her from all those pale faces stretched out towards the stage. The monologue continued, interminable. She was back in the hot-house, under the ardent foliage, and she dreamt that her husband came in and surprised her in the arms of his son. She suffered hideously, she was losing consciousness, when the last death-rattle of Phèdre, repenting and dying in the convulsions of poison, made her re-open her eyes. The curtain fell. Would she have the strength to poison herself some day? How mean and shameful was her tragedy by the side of the idyl of antiquity! And while Maxime fastened her opera-cloak under her chin, she still heard Ristori's rough voice growling behind her, and Œnone's complacent murmur replying.

In the brougham Maxime did all the talking. He thought tragedy "disgusting" as a rule, and preferred the plays at the Bouffes. Nevertheless Phèdre was pretty "thick." He felt interested because. . . . And he squeezed Renée's hand to complete his thought. Then a funny notion came into his head, and he yielded to the impulse to make a joke.

"I was wise," he murmured, "not to go too near the sea at Trouville."

Renée, lost in the depths of her melancholy dream, was silent. He had to repeat his sentence.

"Why?" she asked, astonished, unable to understand.

"Why, the monster . . ."

And he tittered. The jest froze Renée. Everything was becoming unhinged in her head. Ristori was no longer anything but a great buffoon who pulled up her peplon and stuck out her tongue at the audience like Blanche Muller in the third act of *La Belle Hélène,* Théramène danced a can-can, and Hippolyte ate bread and jam, and stuffed his fingers up his nose.

When a more piercing remorse than usual made Renée shudder, she felt an insolent reaction. What was her crime after all, and why should she blush? Did she not tread on greater infamies

every day? Did she not rub shoulders at the ministries, at the Tuileries, everywhere, with wretches like herself, who wore millions on their bodies and were adored on both knees? And she thought of the shameful intimacy of Adeline d'Espanet and Suzanne Haffner, at which one smiled now and again at the Empress's Mondays. And she recalled the traffic driven by Madame de Lauwerens, whose praises were sung by husbands for her propriety, her orderly conduct, her promptness in paying her bills. She called up the names of Madame Daste, Madame Teissière, the Baronne de Meinhold, those creatures who let their lovers pay for their luxuries, and who were quoted in fashionable society as shares are quoted on the Bourse. Madame de Guende was so stupid and so beautifully made, that she had three superior officers for her lovers at the same time, and was unable to tell one from the other, because of their uniform; wherefore that demon of a Louise said that she first made them strip to their shirts so as to know which of the three she was talking to. The Comtesse Vanska for her part could remember court-yards in which she had sung, pavements on which she had been seen, dressed in calico, prowling along like a she-wolf. Each of these women had her shame, her open, triumphant sore. And lastly, overtopping them all, uprose the Duchesse de Sternich, old, ugly, worn-out, with the halo of a night passed in the Imperial bed; she typified official vice, from which she derived as it were a majesty of debauch and a sovereignty over this band of illustrious strumpets.

Then the incestuous woman grew accustomed to her sin as to a gala-dress whose stiffness had at first inconvenienced her. She followed the fashions of the period, she dressed and undressed as others did. She ended by believing herself to live in a world above common morality, in which the senses became refined and developed, and in which one was allowed to strip one's self naked for the benefit of all Olympus. Sin became a luxury, a flower set in the hair, a diamond fastened on the brow. And she again saw, as a justification and a redemption, the

Emperor passing on the general's arm through the two rows of bowing shoulders.

One man alone, Baptiste, her husband's valet, continued to disquiet her. Since Saccard had been showing himself gallant, this tall, pale, dignified valet seemed to walk around her with the solemnity of mute disapprobation. He never looked at her, his cold glances passed higher, above her chignon, with the modesty of a church-beadle refusing to defile his eyes by allowing them to rest on the hair of a sinner. She imagined that he knew everything, she would have purchased his silence had she dared. Then she became filled with uneasiness, she felt a sort of confused respect whenever she met Baptiste, and she said to herself that all the respectability of her household had withdrawn and concealed itself under this lackey's dress-coat.

One day she asked Céleste:

"Does Baptiste make jokes in the kitchen? Have you ever heard any stories about him, has he a mistress?"

"What a question!" was all the maid replied.

"Come, has he made love to you?"

"Eh! but he never looks at women. We hardly ever see him. . . . He is always either with monsieur or in the stables. . . . He says he's very fond of horses."

Renée was irritated at this respectability. She insisted, she would have liked to be able to despise her servants. Although she had taken a liking to Céleste, she would have rejoiced to hear of her having lovers.

"But you yourself, Céleste, don't you think Baptiste is a good-looking fellow?"

"I, madame!" cried the maid, with the stupefied air of a person who has just been told of something prodigious, "oh! I have very different ideas in my head. I don't want a man. I have my own plan, you will see later. I'm not a blockhead, believe me."

Renée could not draw anything more definite from her. Her cares, besides, increased. Her rackety life, her mad escapades,

met with numerous obstacles which it became necessary for her to surmount, however much she might sometimes be bruised by them. It was thus that Louise de Mareuil one day rose up between her and Maxime. She was not jealous of "the hunchback," as she scornfully called her; she knew that she was condemned by the doctors, and could never believe that Maxime would marry an ugly creature like that, even at the price of a dowry of a million. In her fall she had retained a middle-class simplicity with regard to people she loved; though she despised herself, she readily believed them to possess superior and very estimable natures. But whilst rejecting the possibility of a marriage which would have seemed to her a sinister piece of debauchery and a theft, she felt pained at the familiarity and intimacy of the young people. When she spoke of Louise to Maxime, he laughed with sheer satisfaction, he repeated the child's sayings to her, he told her:

"She calls me her little man, you know, the chit."

And he took things so easily that she did not venture to explain to him that this chit was seventeen, and that their way of pulling each other about, their eagerness, when they met in a drawing-room, to seek a shady corner from which to make fun of everybody, grieved her and spoilt her most enjoyable evenings.

An incident occurred which imparted a singular character to the situation. Renée often felt a need of bravado, she had whims of unreasoning audacity. She dragged Maxime behind a curtain, behind a door, and kissed him at the risk of being seen. One Thursday evening, when the buttercup drawing-room was full of people, she was seized with the brilliant idea of calling the young man to her, as he sat talking with Louise; she came towards him, from the heart of the conservatory where she was standing, and suddenly kissed him on the mouth, between two clumps of shrubbery, thinking herself sufficiently concealed. But Louise had followed Maxime. When the lovers raised their heads, they saw her, a few steps away, looking at them with a

strange smile, with no blush nor sign of astonishment, but with the quiet appreciative air of a companion in vice, knowing enough to understand and appreciate a kiss of that sort.

Maxime felt really alarmed that day, and it was Renée who showed herself indifferent and almost light-hearted. That put an end to it. It was impossible now for the hunchback to take her lover from her. She thought to herself:

"I should have done it on purpose. She knows now that 'her little man' belongs to me."

Maxime felt reassured when he again found Louise as frolicsome and entertaining as before. He pronounced her to be "very smart, a very good sort." And that was all.

Renée had reason to be disturbed. Saccard had for some time been thinking of his son's marriage with Mademoiselle de Mareuil. There was a dowry of a million there which he did not mean to let out of his reach, intending later on to lay hands on the money himself. Louise, in the beginning of the winter, had stayed in bed for nearly three weeks, and Saccard was so afraid of seeing her die before the contemplated wedding that he resolved to have the children married forthwith. He did indeed think them a trifle young, but then the doctors feared the month of March for the consumptive girl. On his side M. de Mareuil was in a delicate position. At the last poll he had at length succeeded in being returned as deputy. Only the Corps Législatif had just quashed his election, which was the great scandal of the revisions. This election was quite a mock-heroic poem, on which the newspapers lived for a month. M. Hupel de la Noue, the préfet of the department, had displayed such vigour that the other candidates had been prevented even from placarding their election addresses or distributing their voting-papers. Acting on his advice, M. de Mareuil had covered the constituency with tables at which the peasants ate and drank for a week. He promised, moreover, a railway line, a new bridge, and three churches, and on the eve of the poll he forwarded to the influential electors portraits of the Emperor and Empress,

two large engravings covered with glass and set in gilt frames. This gift was an enormous success, and the majority was overwhelming. But when the Chamber, in presence of the outburst of laughter of the whole of France, found itself compelled to send M. de Mareuil back to his electors, the minister flew into a terrible passion with the préfet and the unfortunate candidate, who had really shown themselves to be too "hot." He even spoke of selecting another name as the official candidate. M. de Mareuil was thunderstruck; he had spent three hundred thousand francs on the department, he owned large estates in it in which he was bored, and he would lose money if he sold them. And so he came to beseech his dear colleague to pacify his brother, and to promise him in his name an absolutely decorous election. It was on this occasion that Saccard again spoke of the children's marriage, and that the two parents definitely decided upon it.

When Maxime was sounded on this subject, he felt embarrassed. Louise amused him, the dowry tempted him still more. He said yes, he agreed to all the dates that Saccard proposed, so as to avoid the tedium of an argument. But to himself he confessed that, unfortunately, things would not be arranged so prettily nor so easily. Renée would never consent; she would cry, she would make scenes; she was capable of creating some great scandal that would astound Paris. It was very unpleasant. She frightened him now. She watched him with perturbing eyes, she possessed him so despotically that he thought he could feel claws digging into his shoulder when she laid her white hand upon it. Her turbulence turned to roughness, and there was a cracked sound beneath her laughter. He really feared that she would one night go mad in his arms. In her remorse, the fear of being surprised, the cruel joys of adultery, did not manifest themselves as in other women in tears and dejection, but in more pronounced eccentricity, in a still more irresistible longing for racket. And amid her growing distraction, one began to hear a rattling, the breaking-up of this adorable and bewildering machine, which was going to pieces.

Maxime patiently awaited an occasion which would rid him of this irksome mistress. He repeated once more that they had been foolish. Though their intimacy had at first lent an additional voluptuousness to their amorous relationship, it now prevented him from breaking off, as he certainly would have done with any other woman. He would have stayed away; that was his method of ending his amours, so as to avoid all effort or dispute. But he felt himself unequal to an explosion, and he still even willingly forgot himself in Renée's embraces: she was motherly, she paid for him, she was ready to help him out of a difficulty whenever a creditor lost patience. Then the thought of Louise returned to him, the thought of the dowry of a million, and made him reflect, even amid Renée's kisses, that "this was all very fine, but it was not serious and must come to an end some time or other."

One night Maxime was so rapidly cleaned out at the house of a lady where cards were often played till daylight, that he experienced one of those fits of dumb anger common to the gambler whose pockets have been emptied. He would have given anything in the world to be able to fling a few more louis on the table. He took up his hat, and, with the mechanical step of a man impelled by a fixed idea, went to the Parc Monceau, opened the little gate, and found himself in the conservatory. It was past midnight. Renée had told him not to come that night. When she now closed her door to him, she no longer even sought to invent an explanation, and he thought only of making the most of his holiday. He did not clearly remember Renée's injunction until he had reached the glass door of the small drawing-room, which was closed. As a rule, when he was expected, Renée undid the fastening of this door beforehand.

"Bah!" he thought, seeing a light in the dressing-room window, "I will whistle and she will come down. I sha'n't disturb her, and if she has a few louis I'll go away at once."

And he whistled softly. He often, for that matter, used this signal to announce his arrival. But this evening he whistled

several times in vain. He grew obstinate, whistled more loudly, not wishing to abandon his idea of an immediate loan. At last he saw the glass door opened with infinite precaution, though he had heard no sound of footsteps. Renée appeared in the twilight of the hot-house, her hair undone, almost without clothes, as though she were just going to bed. Her feet were bare. She pushed him towards one of the arbours, descending the steps and treading on the gravel of the pathways without seeming to feel the cold or the roughness of the ground.

"How stupid of you to whistle so loudly," she murmured with restrained anger. . . . "I told you not to come. What do you want?"

"Oh, let's go up," said Maxime, surprised at this reception. "I will tell you upstairs. You will catch cold."

But as he made a step forward she held him back, and he then noticed that she was horribly pale. She was bowed with a silent terror. Her petticoats, the lace of her underclothing, hung down like tragic shreds upon her trembling skin.

He examined her with growing astonishment.

"What is the matter? Are you ill?"

And he instinctively raised his eyes and glanced through the glass panes of the conservatory at the dressing-room window where he had seen a light.

"But there's a man in your room!" he said suddenly.

"No, no, it's not true," she stammered, beseeching, distraught.

"Nonsense, my dear, I can see his shadow."

Then for a minute they remained there, face to face, not knowing what to say to one another. Renée's teeth chattered with terror, and it seemed to her as if buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied over her feet. Maxime felt more annoyance than he would have believed; but he still remained sufficiently self-possessed to reflect, and to say to himself that the opportunity was a good one for breaking off the connection.

"You won't make me believe that Céleste wears a top-coat,"

he continued. "If the panes of the conservatory were not so thick, I might perhaps recognize the gentleman."

She pushed him deeper into the gloom of the foliage, and seized with a growing terror, said, with clasped hands:

"I beg of you, Maxime . . ."

But all the young man's mischievousness was aroused, a fierce sense of mischief that sought for vengeance. He was too puny to find relief in anger. Spite compressed his lips; and instead of striking her, as he had at first felt inclined to do, he rejoined in a strident voice:

"You should have told me, I should not have come to disturb you. . . . That happens every day, that people cease to care for one another. I was beginning to have enough of it myself. . . . Come, don't grow impatient. I'll let you go up again; but not till you have told me the gentleman's name. . . ."

"Never, never!" murmured Renée, forcing back her tears.

"It's not to challenge him, I only want to know. . . . His name, tell me his name quick, and I'll go."

He was holding her by the wrists, and he looked at her with his bad laugh. And she struggled, distraught, refusing to open her lips, lest the name he asked for should escape her.

"We shall make a noise soon, then you'll be much better off. What are you afraid of? we're good friends, are we not? . . . I want to know who replaces me, that's fair enough. . . . Wait, let me assist you. It's M. de Mussy, whose grief has touched you?"

She made no reply. She bowed her head beneath this interrogatory.

"Not M. de Mussy? . . . The Duc de Rozan, then? Really, not he either? . . . The Comte de Chibray, perhaps? Not even he? . . ."

He stopped, he reflected.

"The deuce, I can't think of anybody. . . . It's not my father, after what you told me? . . ."

Renée started as though she had been scalded, and in a hollow voice:

"No, you know he no longer comes to me. I wouldn't allow it, it would be too degrading."

"Then who is it? "

And he tightened his grasp on her wrists. The poor woman struggled a few moments longer.

"Oh, Maxime, if you knew! . . . And yet I can't tell you. . . ."

Then, conquered, crushed, looking up with affright at the light in the window:

"It's M. de Saffré," she stammered, in a whisper.

Maxime, who had taken delight in his cruel pastime, turned extremely pale before the avowal which he had evoked with so much persistence. He was vexed at the unexpected pain this man's name caused him. He violently threw back Renée's wrists, came up to her, and said to her, full in her face, between his clenched teeth:

"Look here, if you want to know, you're a . . . ! "

He said the word. And he was going away when she ran to him, sobbing, and took him in her arms, murmured words of love, appeals for forgiveness, swore to him that she still adored him, and that she would explain everything the next day. But he disengaged himself, and banging the door of the conservatory, replied:

"No, no, no! it's over, I've had quite enough of it."

She remained crushed. She watched him crossing the garden. The trees of the hot-house seemed to be revolving around her. Then she slowly dragged her bare feet over the gravel of the pathways, climbed up the steps, her skin mottled with cold, she still more tragical in the disorder of her lace. Upstairs she said, in reply to her husband's questions, who was waiting for her, that she thought she would have been able to remember where a little memorandum-book might have got to that had been lost since the morning. And when she was in bed, she suddenly

felt an infinite despair when she reflected that she ought to have told Maxime that his father had come in with her and had followed her into her room in order to discuss some question of money with her.

It was on the next day that Saccard resolved to bring to a head the Charonne business. His wife belonged to him; he had just felt her soft and inert in his hands, like a yielding thing. On the other hand the direction of the Boulevard du Prince-Eugène was about to be settled, and it was necessary that Renée should be despoiled before the news got about of the approaching expropriation. Saccard put an artist's love of his work into this piece of business; he watched his plan ripen with devotion, and set his traps with the refinement of a sportsman who takes a special pride in catching his game skilfully. In his case it was simply the self-satisfaction of an expert gamester, of a man who derives a peculiar enjoyment from ill-gotten gains; he wanted to buy the ground for an old song, and was quite ready then to give his wife a hundred thousand francs' worth of jewellery in the exaltation of his triumph. The simplest operations became complicated so soon as he touched them, and turned into sombre tragedies: he became impassioned, he would have beaten his father for a five-franc piece. And afterwards he scattered his gold right royally.

But before obtaining from Renée the transfer of her share of the property, he had the foresight to go and sound Larsonneau as to the blackmailing intentions of which he suspected him. His intuition saved him in this instance. The expropriation-agent had thought, on his side, that the fruit was now ripe and waiting to be gathered. When Saccard walked into the office in the Rue de Rivoli, he found his associate overcome, giving signs of the most violent despair.

"Ah, my friend," murmured the latter, taking hold of Saccard's hands, "we are lost. . . . I was just coming round to you to discuss the best way out of this terrible scrape. . . ."

While he wrung his hands, and endeavoured to force out a

sob, Saccard noticed that he had been engaged in signing letters as he came in, and that the signatures were admirably firm. He looked at him calmly, and then said:

"Pooh, what has happened, then?"

But the other did not at once reply; he threw himself into his arm-chair in front of his writing-table, and there, with his elbows on his blotting-book, and his forehead between his hands, furiously shook his head. At last, in a hollow voice:

"They have stolen the ledger, I tell you. . . ."

And he told how one of his clerks, a rogue fit for the galleys, had abstracted a large number of books, among which was the famous ledger. The worst of it was that the thief had realized to what use he could put that book, and would only sell it back again for a hundred thousand francs.

Saccard reflected. The story struck him as altogether too clumsy. Obviously Larsonneau did not at heart much care whether he believed it or not. He simply sought a pretext for giving him to understand that he wanted a hundred thousand francs out of the Charonne affair; and in fact that on this condition he would restore the compromising papers in his possession. The bargain seemed too dear to Saccard. He would not have minded allowing his ex-colleague a share; but this ambush prepared for him, this vain attempt to dupe him, irritated him. On the other hand he was not quite easy in his mind; he knew his man, and he knew him to be quite capable of carrying the documents to his brother the minister, who would certainly have paid him to prevent any scandal.

"The devil!" he muttered, sitting down, in his turn, "that's an ugly business. . . . And could I see the rogue in question?"

"I will send for him," said Larsonneau. "He lives close by, in the Rue Jean-Lantier."

Ten minutes had not elapsed when a short young man, squint-eyed, pale-haired, with a face covered with red patches, entered softly, taking care that the door should make no noise. He

was dressed in a badly-cut black frock-coat, too large for him and horribly threadbare. He stood at a respectful distance, watching Saccard out of the corner of his eye, calmly. Larsonneau, addressing him as Baptistin, submitted him to a series of questions to which he replied in monosyllables without being in the least disconcerted; and he received with complete indifference the epithets of thief, swindler, and scoundrel, with which his employer thought fit to accompany each of his questions.

Saccard admired the wretch's coolness. At one moment the expropriation-agent flew from his chair as though to strike him; and he contented himself with taking a step backwards, squinting with greater humility.

"That will do, leave him alone," said the financier. . . . "So, monsieur, you ask a hundred thousand francs to give up those papers?"

"Yes, a hundred thousand francs," replied the young man.

And he went away. Larsonneau seemed unable to calm himself.

"Ugh! what a reptile!" he stuttered. "Did you see his deceitful looks? . . . Those fellows have a timid look, but they'd murder a man for twenty francs."

But Saccard interrupted him and said:

"Bah! he's nothing to be afraid of. I think we shall be able to make terms with him. . . . I came to see you about a much more distressing matter. . . . You were right to distrust my wife, my dear friend. Try and realize that she wants to sell her share in the property to M. Haffner. She needs money, she says. Her friend Suzanne must have egged her on."

The other abruptly ceased his lamentations; he listened, rather pale, adjusting his stand-up collar, which had become bent during his anger.

"This transfer," continued Saccard, "means ruin to our expectations. If M. Haffner becomes your co-partner, not only will our profits be compromised, but I am dreadfully afraid

we shall find ourselves in a very unpleasant position in regard to that fastidious person, who will insist on examining the accounts."

The expropriation-agent began walking up and down with an agitated step, his patent-leather boots creaking on the carpet.

"You see," he muttered, "in what a position one puts one's self to oblige people! . . . But, my dear fellow, in your place I should absolutely prevent my wife from doing anything so foolish. I would rather beat her."

"Ah, my friend! . . ." said the financier, with a cunning smile, "I have no more power over my wife than you seem to have over that low scoundrel of a Baptistin."

Larsonneau stopped short before Saccard, who went on smiling, and glanced up at him with a penetrating look. Then he resumed his walk to and fro, but with a slow and measured step. He went up to a mirror, pulled up the bow of his cravat, and walked on again, regaining his elegant manner. And suddenly:

"Baptistin!" he cried.

The little young man with the squint came in, but through another door. He no longer carried a hat, but twisted a pen between his fingers.

"Go and fetch the ledger," said Larsonneau to him.

And when he was gone, he discussed the amount they were to give him.

"Do this for my sake," he ended by saying, quite bluntly.

Then Saccard consented to give thirty thousand francs out of the future profits of the Charonne undertaking. He considered that he had escaped cheaply from the usurer's gloved hands. The latter had the promise made out to his name, keeping up the pretence to the end, saying that he would account for the thirty thousand francs to the young man. It was with a laugh of relief that Saccard burnt the ledger in the flames of the fire, page by page. Then, this operation over, he shook Larsonneau vigorously by the hand, and left him, saying:

"You are going to Laure's to-night, are you not? . . . Look

out for me. I shall have settled everything with my wife; we shall make our final arrangements."

Laure d'Aurigny, who often changed her address, was at that time living in a large apartment on the Boulevard Haussmann, opposite the Chapelle Expiatoire. She had taken to having a day every week, like the ladies in the real world. It enabled her to bring together at the same time all the men who saw her, separately, during the week. Aristide Saccard exulted in these Tuesday evenings; he was the acknowledged protector; and he turned away his head, with a vacuous laugh, whenever the mistress of the house deceived him in the doorways by granting an assignation for the same night to one of those gentlemen. He stayed till all the rest had gone, lit another cigar, talked business, joked a moment about the gentleman who was dancing attendance in the street, while waiting for him to go, and then, after calling Laure "his dear child" and giving her a little pat on the cheek, he quietly went out by one way while the gentleman came in by another. The secret treaty of alliance, which had consolidated Saccard's credit and provided the d'Aurigny with two sets of furniture in one month, continued to amuse them. But Laure wanted a finale to this comedy. This finale, arranged beforehand, was to consist in a public rupture, in favour of some idiot who would pay a heavy price for the right of becoming the serious protector and of being known as such to all Paris. The idiot was forthcoming. The Duc de Rozan, tired of wearying the women of his own set to no purpose, dreamt of acquiring the reputation of a debauchee, in order to lend some relief to his insipid personality. He was an assiduous visitor at Laure's Tuesdays, and had conquered her by his absolute innocence. Unfortunately, although thirty-five years of age, he was still dependent upon his mother, so much so that the most he could dispose of was some ten louis at a time. On the evenings when Laure deigned to take his ten louis, pitying herself, talking of the hundred thousand francs she stood in need of, he sighed, he promised to give it her on

the day when he should be his own master. Thereupon she conceived the bright idea of causing him to make friends with Larsonneau, one of the familiars of the house. The two men breakfasted together at Tortoni's; and at dessert Larsonneau, while describing his love affair with a delicious Spaniard, professed to know some money-lenders; but he strongly advised Rozan never to fall into their clutches. This disclosure excited the duc, who ended by wringing a promise from his good friend that he would interest himself in "his little affair." He took so practical an interest in it that he was to bring the money on the very evening when Saccard had arranged to meet him at Laure's.

When Larsonneau entered the d'Aurigny's great white-and-gold drawing-room, there had arrived only five or six women, who seized his hands and hung round his neck with a great display of affection. They called him "that big Lar!" a caressing diminutive invented by Laure. And he replied, in fluted tones:

"There, there, my turtle-doves; you'll crush my hat."

They calmed down, and gathered close round him on a couch, while he told them about a stomach-ache of Sylvia's with whom he had supped the night before. Then, taking a bag of sweets from the pocket of his dress-coat, he handed round some burnt almonds. But Laure came in from her bedroom, and as many gentlemen were arriving, she drew Larsonneau into a boudoir at one end of the drawing-room, from which it was separated by a double set of hangings.

"Have you the money?" she asked, when they were alone.

She addressed him in the second person singular on important occasions. Larsonneau made no reply, but bowed humorously, and tapped the inside pocket of his coat.

"Oh, that big Lar!" murmured the young woman, enchanted.

And she seized him round the waist and kissed him.

"Wait," she said, "I want the curl-papers at once. . . . Rozan is in my room, I will fetch him."

But he held her back, and kissing her on the shoulders in his turn:

"You know what commission I asked of you?"

"Why, yes, you great stupid, that's all right."

She returned with Rozan. Larsonneau was dressed more correctly than the duc, with better fitting gloves and a more artistic cravat. They touched hands carelessly, and talked of the races of two days ago, when one of their friends had run a loser. Laure stamped about.

"Come, never mind all that, dear," she said to Rozan, "that big Lar has the money, you know. We had better settle up."

Larsonneau pretended to remember.

"Ah yes, that's true," he said, "I have the amount. . . . But how much wiser you would have been to have listened to me, old chap! To think that those rogues asked me fifty per cent! . . . However, I agreed at any cost, as you told me it made no difference. . . ."

Laure d'Aurigny had procured some bill-stamps during the day. But when it became a question of a pen and ink, she looked at the two men with an air of consternation, doubting whether she had such a thing in the house. She proposed to go and look in the kitchen, when Larsonneau took from his pocket, the same pocket that held the bag of sweets, two marvels, a silver penholder that screwed out, and an inkstand in steel and ebony, finished off as daintily as a trinket. And as Rozan sat down:

"Make the notes payable to me," he said. "You understand, I did not want to compromise you. We will settle that between ourselves. . . . Six bills of twenty-five thousand francs each, see?"

Laure counted the "curl-papers" at a corner of the table. Rozan did not even see them. When he had signed, and raised

his head, they had disappeared in the woman's pocket. But she came up to him and kissed him on both cheeks, to his evident delight. Larsonneau watched them philosophically as he folded up the bills, and replaced the inkstand and the pen-holder in his pocket.

Laure was still with her arms round Rozan's neck, when Aristide Saccard lifted a corner of the door-hangings.

"That's right, don't mind me," he said, laughing.

The duc blushed. But Laure went and shook hands with the financier, exchanging a wink of intelligence with him. She was radiant.

"It's done, my dear," she said; "I warned you. You're not very angry with me?"

Saccard shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly. He pulled back the hangings, and standing aside to allow Laure and the duc to pass, he cried, in the shrill voice of a gentleman-usher:

"Monsieur the duc, madame the duchesse!"

This joke met with immense success. The newspapers printed it the next day, giving Laure d'Aurigny's real name, and describing the two men by very transparent initials. The rupture between Aristide Saccard and the fat Laure caused even more stir than their pretended love-affair.

Meantime Saccard had let fall the curtain on the burst of merriment which his joke had occasioned in the drawing-room.

"Eh! what a jolly girl!" he said, turning towards Larsonneau. "And so depraved! . . . It's you, you scamp, who get the most out of all this. What are you to have?"

But the other protested with smiles; and he pulled down his shirt-cuffs, which were working up. At last he came and sat down near the door on a couch to which Saccard beckoned him.

"Come here, I don't want to confess you, dash it all! . . . Let's get to serious business, old chap. I had a long conversation with my wife to-night. . . . It's all settled."

"Does she consent to transfer her share?" asked Larsonneau.

"Yes, but it was not without difficulty. . . . Women are so

obstinate! You know my wife had promised an old aunt of hers not to sell out. There was no end to her scruples. . . . Fortunately I had a quite unanswerable story ready."

He rose to light a cigar at the candle which Laure had left on the table, and returning stretched himself at his ease on the couch:

"I told my wife," he continued, "that you were completely ruined. . . . You had gambled on the Bourse, squandered your money on women, plunged into stupid speculations: in short, you are on the verge of a terrible bankruptcy. . . . I even gave her to understand that I did not consider you perfectly honest. . . . Then I explained to her that the Charonne affair would be swallowed up in your disaster, and that the best would be for her to accept the proposal you had made me to release her and to buy her out for an old song, no doubt."

"I don't call that clever," muttered the expropriation-agent. "Do you think your wife will believe such rot as that?"

Saccard smiled. He was in one of his communicative moods.

"How simple you are, my dear fellow!" he resumed. "What has the plot of the story to do with it? It's the details, the gesture, the accent: that's the thing. Call Rozan over, and I bet I persuade him it's broad daylight. And my wife has no more brains than Rozan. . . . I gave her a glimpse of an abyss. She has no suspicion of the coming expropriation. As she expressed surprise that in the midst of a catastrophe you could think of taking over a still heavier burden, I told her that she no doubt stood in the way of some ugly trick you proposed to play your creditors. . . . At last I advised her to consent, as being the only way to avoid being mixed up in endless lawsuits and to get some money out of her property."

Larsonneau still thought the story rather clumsy. His own method was less melodramatic; each of his transactions was put together and unravelled with all the elegance of a drawing-room comedy.

"Personally, I should have thought of something different,"

he said. "However, everyone has his own system. . . . So all we have to do now is to pay up."

"It is on this subject," replied Saccard, "that I want to come to an arrangement with you. . . . To-morrow I will take the deed of transfer to my wife, and she will only have to send you this deed in order to receive the stipulated price. . . . I prefer to avoid an interview."

As a matter of fact he had never allowed Larsonneau to visit them on an intimate footing. He did not ask him to the house, and he went with him to Renée whenever it was absolutely necessary for the two partners to meet; that had happened thrice. He nearly always acted with a power of attorney from his wife, not seeing the use of allowing her to know too much of his affairs.

He opened his pocket-book, and added:

"Here are the two hundred thousand francs' worth of bills accepted by my wife; you must give her those in payment, and add one hundred thousand francs, which I will bring you to-morrow in the course of the morning. . . . I am ruining myself, my dear friend. This business will cost me a fortune."

"But that," observed the expropriation-agent, "will only make three hundred thousand francs. . . . Will the receipt be made out for that sum?"

"A receipt for three hundred thousand francs!" rejoined Saccard, laughing. "I should think so! We should be in a nice fix later on. According to our inventories, the property must now be estimated at two million five hundred thousand francs. The receipt will be for half that, of course."

"Your wife will never sign it."

"Yes, she will. I tell you it's all right. . . . Why, I told her it was your first condition. You hold a pistol to our heads, don't you see, with your bankruptcy? And it is in that matter that I pretended to doubt your honesty and accused you of wishing to cheat your creditors. . . . Do you think my wife understands a word of all that?"

Larsonneau shook his head and murmured:

"No matter, you ought to have thought of something simpler."

"But my story is simplicity itself!" said Saccard, in great astonishment. "Where the devil do you find it complicated?"

He was quite unconscious of the incredible number of threads with which he interwove the most ordinary piece of business. He derived a real joy from the cock-and-bull story he had just told Renée; and what enraptured him was the impudence of the lie, the heaping up of impossibilities, the astonishing complication of the plot. He could have had the building-land long ago had he not worked out all this drama; but he would have found less enjoyment in obtaining it easily. He set to work, on the contrary, with the utmost naïveté to make a whole financial melodrama out of the Charonne speculation.

He rose, and taking Larsonneau's arm, walked towards the drawing-room.

"You have quite understood me, have you not? Be content to follow my instructions, and later on you'll applaud me. . . . I say, my dear fellow, you ought not to wear yellow gloves, they spoil the look of your hands."

The expropriation-agent only smiled and murmured:

"Oh, gloves have their advantages, my dear master: you can touch anything without being defiled."

As they entered the drawing-room, Saccard was surprised and somewhat alarmed to find Maxime on the other side of the hangings. The young man was seated on a couch beside a blonde lady who was telling him, in a monotonous voice, a long story, her own no doubt. He had, in point of fact, overheard his father's conversation with Larsonneau. The two accomplices seemed to him a pair of cunning dogs. Still annoyed by Renée's betrayal, he felt a cowardly pleasure in learning of the theft of which she was to be the victim. It avenged him a little. His father came and shook hands with him with a sus-

picious look, but Maxime whispered to him, motioning to the blonde lady:

"She's not bad, is she? I'm going to 'bag' her for to-night."

Then Saccard began to pose and play the gallant. Laure d'Aurigny joined them for a moment; she complained that Maxime barely called on her once a month. But he professed to have been very busy, whereat everyone laughed. He added that in future they would see him wherever they went.

"I have been writing a tragedy," he said, "and I only hit upon the fifth act yesterday. . . . I now mean to seek repose in the bosoms of all the pretty women in Paris."

He laughed. He relished his allusions, which only he could understand. Meantime there was no one left in the drawing-room except Rozan and Larsonneau, at either side of the chimney. The Saccards rose to go, as did the blonde lady, who lived in the same house. Then the d'Aurigny went and spoke to the duc in a low voice. He seemed surprised and annoyed. Seeing that he could not make up his mind to leave his chair:

"No, really, not to-night," she said in an undertone. "I have a headache! . . . To-morrow, I promise you."

Rozan could not but obey. Laure waited till he was on the landing, and then said quickly in Larsonneau's ear:

"See, big Lar? I keep my word. . . . Stuff him into his carriage."

When the blonde lady took leave of the gentlemen to go up to her apartment, which was on the floor above, Saccard was astonished not to see Maxime follow her.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, no," replied the young man. "I've thought better of it. . . ."

Then he had an idea that struck him as very funny:

"I'll resign in your favour if you like. Hurry up, she hasn't shut her door yet."

But the father shrugged his shoulders, and said:

"Thanks, I have something better than that at present."

The four men went downstairs. Outside the duc insisted on taking Larsonneau in his carriage; his mother lived in the Marais, he could drop the expropriation-agent at his door in the Rue de Rivoli. The latter refused, closed the door himself, and told the coachman to drive on. And he remained on the pavement of the Boulevard Haussmann with the two others, talking, staying where he was.

"Ah! poor Rozan!" said Saccard, who suddenly understood.

Larsonneau swore that it was not so, that he didn't care a rush for that, that he was a practical man. And as the two others continued to joke, and as the cold was very sharp, he ended by exclaiming:

"Upon my word, I don't care, I'm going to ring. . . . You are two busybodies, messieurs."

"Good night!" cried Maxime, as the door closed to.

And taking his father's arm, he walked up the boulevard with him. It was one of those clear, frosty nights when it is so pleasant to walk on the hard ground through the icy atmosphere. Saccard said that Larsonneau made a mistake, that he ought merely to be the d'Aurigny's friend. From there he went on to declare that the love of those women was really a bad thing. He assumed an air of morality, gave utterance to maxims and precepts of astonishing propriety.

"You see," he said to his son, "that only lasts for a time, my boy. . . . You lose your health at it, and you don't taste real happiness. You know I'm not a Puritan. Well, I tell you, I've had enough of it; I'm going to settle down."

Maxime chuckled; he stopped his father, looked at him in the moonlight, and told him he was "an old fat-head." But Saccard became still more serious:

"Joke as much as you like. I tell you again, there is nothing like marriage to keep a man in good condition and make him happy."

Then he spoke to him of Louise. And he walked more slowly, to finish the business, he said, as they were once on the

subject. The thing was completely arranged. He even informed him that he and M. de Mareuil had fixed the date for signing the contract for the Sunday following the Thursday in mid-Lent. On that Thursday there was to be a great entertainment at the house in the Parc Monceau, and he would then take the opportunity publicly to announce the marriage. Maxime thought all this very satisfactory. He was rid of Renée, he saw no further obstacle, he surrendered himself to his father as he had surrendered himself to his stepmother.

"Well then, that's settled," he said. "Only don't talk about it to Renée. Her friends would chaff me and tease me, and I prefer that she should know of it at the same time as everybody else."

Saccard promised to be silent. Then, as they approached the top of the Boulevard Malesherbes, he again gave him a heap of excellent advice. He told him how he ought to set about in order to make his home a paradise.

"Above all, never break off with your wife. It's folly. A wife with whom you cease having connection costs you a fortune. . . . In the first place, you have to keep a woman, don't you? And then the house expenses are much greater: there are dresses, madame's private amusements, her dearest friends, the devil and all his retinue."

He was in a mood of extraordinary virtue. The success of his Charonne business had filled his heart with idyllic affection.

"As for me," he continued, "I was born to live in happy obscurity down in some village, with all my family around me. . . . People don't know me, my boy . . . . I give the impression of being very frivolous. Well, that's quite a mistake. I should love to be always near my wife, I would willingly exchange my business for a modest income that would enable me to retire to Plassans. . . . You are going to be a rich man; make yourself a home with Louise in which you will live like two turtle-doves. It's so pleasant! I will come and see you. That will do me good."

He ended with tears in his voice. Meanwhile they had reached the gate of the house, and they stood talking on the kerbstone. A North wind was sweeping over the heights of Paris. No sound arose in the pale night, white with frost; Maxime, surprised at his father's emotion, had had a question on his lips for the past minute.

"But you," he said at last, "it seems to me. . . ."

"What?"

"Well, with your wife!"

Saccard shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, just so! I was a fool. That is why I am able to speak to you from experience. . . . But we have come together again, oh, entirely! It is almost six weeks ago. I go into her at night when I don't get home too late. To-night the poor little dear will have to do without me; I have to work till daylight. I tell you, she's jolly well made! . . ."

As Maxime held out his hand to him, he kept him back, and added, in a confidential whisper:

"You know Blanche Muller's figure; well, it's like that, only ten times more supple. And then such hips! they have a curve, an elegance . . . !"

And he concluded by saying to the younger man, who was going off:

"You are like me, you have a heart, you will make your wife happy. . . . Good-night, my boy!"

When Maxime at last escaped from his father, he went quickly round the gardens. What he had just heard surprised him so greatly that he experienced an irresistible desire to see Renée. He wanted to beg forgiveness for his brutality, to know why she had told him that lie about M. de Saffré, to learn the story of her husband's affection. But all this confusedly, with the one clear wish to smoke a cigar in her rooms and to resume their friendly relations. If she was in the right humour, he would even announce his marriage to her, to make her see that their love-affair must remain dead and buried. When he had opened the little

gate, of which he had fortunately kept the key, he ended by convincing himself that his visit, after his father's revelations, was necessary and absolutely proper.

In the conservatory he whistled as he had done the preceding evening; but he was not kept waiting. Renée came and unfastened the glass door of the small drawing-room, and led the way upstairs without a word. She had that instant come back from a ball at the Hôtel de Ville. She still wore her dress of white puffed tulle, covered with satin bows; the skirts of the satin bodice were edged with a broad border of white bugles, which the light of the candles tinged with blue and pink. Upstairs, when Maxime looked at her, he was touched by her pallor and the deep emotion that stifled her utterance. She had evidently not expected him, she still quivered all over at seeing him arrive as usual, with his quiet, wheedling air. Céleste returned from the wardrobe-room, where she had been to fetch a night-dress, and the lovers remained silent, waiting for the girl to go. As a rule they did not mind what they said before her; but they felt ashamed of the things that were on their lips. Renée told Céleste to undress her in the bedroom, where there was a big fire. The lady's-maid removed the pins, took off each article of finery separately, without hurrying herself. And Maxime, bored, mechanically took up the night-dress, which was lying on a chair beside him, and warmed it before the fire, leaning forward with arms outstretched. He had been used in happier times to do this little service for Renée. She felt moved when she saw him daintily holding the night-gown to the fire. Then, as Céleste had not yet finished:

"Did you enjoy yourself at the ball?" he asked.

"Oh no, it's always the same thing, you know," she replied. "Far too many people, a regular crush."

He turned the night-gown, which was hot on one side.

"What did Adeline wear?"

"Mauve, a badly thought-out dress. . . . She is short, and yet she dotes on flounces."

They talked of the other women. Maxime was now burning his fingers with the chemise.

"But you'll scorch it," said Renée, whose voice sounded maternally caressing.

Céleste took the chemise from the young man's hands. He rose and went over to the great pink-and-gray bed, fixing his eyes on one of the embroidered bouquets on the curtains, so as to turn away his head and not see Renée's naked breasts. He did this by intuition. He no longer considered himself her lover, he had no longer the right to look. Then he took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. Renée had given him permission to smoke in her room. At last Céleste withdrew, leaving the young woman by the fireside, all white in her night-dress.

Maxime walked about a few seconds longer, without speaking, glancing at Renée, who seemed to be seized with a fresh shudder. And stationing himself before the fire, with his cigar between his teeth, he asked abruptly:

"Why didn't you tell me that it was my father who was with you last night?"

She raised her head, her eyes wide open, with a look of supreme anguish; then a rush of blood crimsoned her features, and, overwhelmed with shame, she hid her face in her hands, stammering:

"You know that? you know that? . . ."

She recovered herself, she tried to lie.

"It's not true. . . . Who told you?"

Maxime shrugged his shoulders.

"Why, my father himself, who thinks you jolly well made and talked to me about your hips."

He had allowed a little vexation to show itself. But he began walking about again, and continued in a scolding but friendly voice between two puffs at his cigar:

"Really, I can't understand you. You're a strange woman. It was your own fault if I behaved like a brute yesterday. You ought to have told me it was my father, and I should have gone

away quietly, don't you see? What right have I? . . . But you go and tell me it's M. de Saffré! "

She sobbed, her hands over her face. He came up to her, knelt down before her, and forced her hands apart.

" Come, tell me why you said it was M. de Saffré! "

Then, still averting her head, she replied through her tears, in a low voice:

" I thought you would leave me if you knew that your father . . ."

He rose to his feet, took up his cigar, which he had laid on a corner of the mantelshelf, and contented himself with muttering:

" You're a very funny woman, on my word! "

She no longer cried. The flames in the grate and the fire in her cheeks had dried her tears. The surprise of seeing Maxime so self-possessed in presence of a revelation which she thought would crush him made her forget her shame. She watched him walking up and down, she listened to his voice as though she were dreaming. Without abandoning his cigar he repeated to her that she was absurd, that it was quite natural that she should have connection with her husband, that he really could not think of resenting it. But to go and confess that she had a lover when it wasn't true! And he kept on returning to this, to this point which he could not understand and which he looked upon as positively monstrous, talked of women's " foolish fancies."

" You're not quite right in your mind, dear; you must be careful."

He wound up by asking inquisitively:

" But why M. de Saffré more than another? "

" He makes love to me," said Renée.

Maxime checked an impertinence; he was on the point of saying that she was doubtless only anticipating by a month when she owned to M. de Saffré as her lover. He only smiled wickedly at his spiteful idea, and throwing his cigar into the fire, sat down

at the opposite side of the mantelpiece. There, he talked common-sense, he gave Renée to understand that they must remain good friends. Her fixed look embarrassed him, however, he had not the courage to tell her of his approaching marriage. She gazed at him, her eyes still swollen with tears. She thought him a poor creature, narrow-minded and contemptible, and yet she loved him, as she might love her lace. He looked handsome in the light of the candelabra standing at the corner of the mantel by his side. As he threw back his head, the light of the candles tinged his hair with gold and glided over the soft down on his cheeks with a charmingly blonde effect.

"I must really be off," he said several times.

He had quite decided not to stay. Besides, Renée would not have let him. They both thought so, said so: they were now merely friends. And when Maxime at last pressed Renée's hand and was on the point of leaving the room, she detained him for a moment longer and spoke to him of his father. She sang his praises loudly.

"You see, I felt too great a remorse. I prefer that this should have happened. . . . You don't know your father; I was astonished to find him so kind, so disinterested. The poor man is so much worried at present."

Maxime examined the tips of his boots without replying, with an air of uneasiness. She persisted:

"So long as he used not to come to this room, I did not care. But afterwards . . . . When I saw him here, so affectionate, bringing me money that he must have scraped together in every corner of Paris, ruining himself for me without a murmur, I became ill to think of it. . . . If you knew how carefully he has watched over my interests!"

The young man returned quietly to the mantelpiece, and leant against it. He stood there embarrassed, with bowed head, and a smile that slowly rose to his lips.

"Yes," he muttered, "that's my father's strong point, to look after people's interests."

Renée was astonished at the tone of his voice. She looked at him, and he, as if to defend himself, added:

"Oh, I don't know anything. . . . I only say my father is a clever man."

"You would do wrong to talk ill of him," she replied. "You evidently judge him a little superficially. . . . If I were to tell you all his troubles, if I repeated to you what he told me this very evening, you would see how mistaken people are when they think he cares for money. . . ."

Maxime could not help shrugging his shoulders. He interrupted his stepmother with an ironical laugh.

"Believe me, I know him, I know him well. . . . He must have told you some fine tales. Let me hear what he said."

This bantering tone offended her. Whereupon she increased her praises, she considered her husband quite great, she talked of the Charonne affair, of that swindle, of which she had understood nothing, as though it had been a catastrophe in which Saccard's intelligence and kind-heartedness had been revealed to her. She added that she should sign the deed of transfer the next day, and that if it was really a disaster, she accepted the disaster as a punishment for her sins. Maxime let her go on, chuckling, looking at her from under his eyelids; then he said in an undertone:

"That's it; that's quite right . . . ."

And louder, laying his hand on Renée's shoulder:

"Thanks, dear, but I knew the story. . . . What soft stuff you must be made of!"

He moved away again as if to go. He felt a furious itching to tell everything. She had exasperated him with her eulogy of her husband, and he forgot that he had resolved not to speak, so as to avoid all unpleasantness.

"Why? what do you mean?" she asked.

"Well then, that my father has been having you as nicely as could be. . . . I am sorry for you, on my word; you are such a simpleton!"

And he told her what he had heard at Laure's, told her basely, craftily, taking a secret delight in dwelling upon these infamies. It seemed to him that he was taking his revenge for a vague insult that he had received. His harlot's temperament lingered rapturously over this denunciation, over this cruel gossip of what he had heard behind a door. He spared Renée no detail, neither the money her husband had lent her at usury, nor that which he meant to steal from her with the assistance of ridiculous fairy-tales fit to send children to sleep with. Renée listened, very pale, her lips compressed. Standing before the chimney-piece, she lowered her head a little, she looked into the fire. Her night-dress, the chemise which Maxime had warmed for her, opened out, revealing a motionless whiteness as of a statue.

"I am telling you all this," the young man concluded, "so that you may not look a fool. . . . But you must not take it amiss of my father. He means well. He has his faults like all of us. . . . Till to-morrow, then."

He retreated towards the door. Renée stopped him with a quick gesture.

"Stay!" she cried, imperiously.

And seizing him, drawing him to her, almost seating him on her knees before the fire, she kissed him on the lips, and said:

"Ah well, it would be too silly to put ourselves out after that. . . . I haven't told you that since yesterday, when you wanted to break with me, I have been off my head. I feel half mad. At the ball to-night I had a mist before my eyes. The fact is that I can't live without you now. When you leave me, I shall be done for. . . . Don't laugh, I mean what I say."

She gave him a look of infinite tenderness, as though she had not seen him for a long time.

"You were right, I was a simpleton, your father could have made me see stars in broad daylight to-day. What did I know about it? All the time he was telling his story, I heard nothing but a great buzzing, and I was so crushed that he could have

made me go down on my knees, if he had wanted to, to sign his old papers. And I fancied I felt remorse! . . . Yes, I was silly enough to think that! "

She burst into laughter, a mad light shone in her eyes. Pressing her lover still more tightly, she continued:

" Do we sin, you and I? We are in love, and we amuse ourselves as we like. That's what all of us have come to, have we not? . . . Look at your father, he does not put himself out. He is fond of money and he takes it when he can get it. He's quite right, and it sets me at my ease. . . . To begin with, I sha'n't sign a single thing, and then you must come back every evening. I was afraid you would refuse, you know, because of what I told you. . . . But you say you don't mind. . . . Besides, I shall keep him out now, you understand."

She rose and lit the night-light. Maxime hesitated in despair. He saw what a piece of folly he had perpetrated, and he reproached himself harshly for having talked too much. How could he now tell her of his marriage? It was his own fault, the rupture had been accomplished, there was no need for him to go up into that room again, nor above all to go and prove to Renée that her husband was swindling her. And his anger against himself increased when he found that he was not able to remember what had prompted him to act as he did. He thought for a moment of being brutal a second time, but the sight of Renée taking off her slippers filled him with insurmountable cowardice. He was frightened. He stayed.

The next day, when Saccard came to his wife to make her sign the deed of transfer, she replied quietly that she did not mean to do so, that she had thought better of it. On the other hand, she gave him no hint whatever; she had sworn to be discreet, not wishing to create worries for herself, eager only to enjoy the renewal of her amour in peace. The Charonne affair could arrange itself as it pleased; her refusal to sign was merely an act of vengeance; she did not care a scrap for the rest. Saccard was on the verge of flying into a passion. His whole dream

crumbled away. His other affairs were going from bad to worse. He had come to the end of his resources, and only kept his balance by miracles of equilibrium: that very morning he had been unable to pay his baker's bill. This did not prevent him from preparing a splendid entertainment for the Thursday in mid-Lent. In the presence of Renée's refusal he experienced the white rage of a vigorous man that is hindered in his work by a child's caprice. With the deed of transfer in his pocket he had relied on being able to raise cash while waiting for the indemnity. Then, when he had calmed down a little, and looked at things clearly, he was amazed at his wife's sudden change of mind; some one must, undoubtedly, have advised her. He suspected a lover. He had so clear a presentiment, that he ran round to his sister to question her, to ask her if she knew anything of Renée's private life. Sidonie displayed great acrimony. She had not forgotten the affront her sister-in-law had given her in refusing to see M. de Saffré. So when she understood from her brother's questions that he accused his wife of having a lover, she cried out that she felt certain of it. And she offered of her own accord to spy on "the turtle-doves." She would show the minx what sort of stuff she was made of. As a rule Saccard did not seek out disagreeable truths; his interest alone compelled him to open his discreetly-closed eyes. He accepted his sister's offer.

"I tell you, make your mind easy, I shall find out everything," she said to him, in a voice full of compassion . . . . "Ah, my poor brother, Angèle would never have betrayed you! So good, so generous a husband! Those Parisian dolls have no heart. . . . And to think that I always gave her good advice!"

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a fancy-dress ball at the Saccard's on the Thursday in mid-Lent. The great event, however, of the evening was the poem of *Les Amours du Beau Narcisse et de la Nymphe Écho*, in three tableaux, which was to be performed by the ladies. The author of the poem, M. Hupel de la Noue, had for more than a month been journeying to and fro between his préfecture and the house in the Parc Monceau in order to superintend the rehearsals and give his advice on the costumes. He had at first thought of writing his work in verse; then he had decided in favour of the tableaux vivants; it was more dignified, he said, and came nearer to the classical ideal.

The ladies had no more rest. Some of them had no less than three changes of dress. There were endless conferences, over which the préfet presided. To begin with, the character of Narcissus was discussed at length. Was it to be enacted by a woman or by a man? At last, at Renée's entreaties, it was decided that the part should be entrusted to Maxime; but he was to be the only man, and even then Madame de Lauwerens declared she would never have consented to this if "little Maxime had not been so like a real girl." Renée was to be Echo. The question of the dresses was far more complicated. Maxime was of great assistance to the préfet, who was distracted in the midst of the nine women whose mad imaginations threatened seriously to compromise the purity of outline of his work. Had he listened to them, Olympus would have worn powdered hair. Madame d'Espanet wanted positively to have a train to her dress so as to hide her feet, which were a trifle large, while Madame Haffner had visions of herself clad in the skin of a wild beast. M. Hupel de la Noue was vehement; once he even grew angry; he

had made up his mind; he said that the only reason why he had renounced verse was that he might write his poem "in cunningly-contrived fabrics and the most beautiful eclectic poses."

"The general effect, mesdames," he repeated at each fresh instance of unreasonableness, "you forget the general effect . . . . I can't possibly spoil my whole work for the sake of the furbelows you ask me for."

The conferences took place in the buttercup drawing-room. Whole afternoons were spent in settling the cut of a skirt. Worms was called in several times. At last all was arranged, the costumes decided on, the positions learnt, and M. Hupel de la Noue declared he was satisfied. Not even the election of M. de Mareuil had given him so much trouble.

Les Amours du Beau Narcisse et de la Nymphe Écho was to begin at eleven o'clock. At half-past ten the large drawing-room was full, and as there was to be a fancy-dress ball afterwards, the women had come in costume, and were seated on chairs ranged in a semi-circle before the improvised stage, a platform hidden by two broad curtains of red velvet with a gold fringe, running on rods. The men stood at the back, or moved to and fro. At ten o'clock the upholsterers had driven the last nail. The platform was erected at the end of the long gallery of a drawing-room, and occupied a whole section of it. The stage was approached from the smoking-room, which had been converted into a green-room for the actors. In addition, the ladies had a number of rooms at their disposal on the first floor, where an army of ladies' maids laid out the costumes for the different tableaux.

It was half-past eleven, and the curtains were not yet drawn apart. A loud buzzing filled the drawing-room. The rows of chairs offered a bewildering display of marquises, noble dames, milk-maids, Spanish ladies, shepherdesses, sultanas; while the compact mass of dress-coats set a great black blotch beside that shimmering of bright stuffs and bare shoulders, all flashing with the bright scintillations of jewellery. The women alone were

in fancy-dress. It was already getting warm. The three chandeliers lit up the golden flood of the drawing-room.

At last M. Hupel de la Noue was seen to emerge from an opening arranged on the left of the platform. He had been helping the ladies since eight o'clock in the evening. His dress-coat had on the left sleeve the mark of three white fingers, a small woman's hand which had been laid there after dabbling in a box of rice-powder. But the préfet had other things to think of besides his dress! His eyes were dilated, his face swollen and rather pale. He seemed to see nobody. And advancing towards Saccard, whom he recognized among a group of serious men, he said to him in an undertone:

"Damn it all! Your wife has lost her girdle of leaves. . . . We're in a pretty mess!"

He swore, he could have thumped people. Then, without waiting for a reply, without looking at anything, he turned his back, dived under the draperies, and disappeared. The ladies smiled at this queer apparition.

The group amid which Saccard was standing was clustered behind the last row of chairs. An arm-chair had even been drawn out of the row for the Baron Gouraud, whose legs had been swelling for some time past. There were there M. Toutin-Laroche, whom the Emperor had just created a senator; M. de Mareuil, whose second election the Chamber had deigned to confirm; M. Michelin, newly decorated; and, a little further back, the Mignon and Charrier couple, of whom one wore a big diamond in his necktie, while the other displayed a still bigger one on his finger. The gentlemen chatted together. Saccard left them for a moment to go and exchange a whispered word with his sister, who had just come in and was sitting between Louise de Mareuil and Madame Michelin. Madame Sidonie was disguised as a sorceress; Louise was jauntily attired in a page's dress that made her look quite an urchin; the little Michelin, dressed as an alme, smiled amorously through her veils embroidered with threads of gold.

"Have you learnt anything?" Saccard softly asked his sister.

"No, not yet," she replied. "But the spark must be here . . . . I'll catch them to-night, make yourself easy."

"Let me know at once, won't you?"

And Saccard, turning to right and left, complimented Louise and Madame Michelin. He compared the latter to one of Mahomet's houris, the former to a favourite of Henry III. His Provençal accent seemed to make the whole of his spare, strident figure sing with delight. When he returned to the group of serious men, M. de Mareuil took him aside and spoke to him of their children's marriage. Nothing was altered, the contract was still to be signed on the following Sunday.

"Quite so," said Saccard. "I intend even to announce the match to our friends this evening, if you see no objection . . . . I am only waiting for my brother the minister, who has promised to come."

The new deputy was delighted. Meantime, M. Toutin-Laroche was raising his voice as though seized with lively indignation.

"Yes, messieurs," he said to M. Michelin and the two contractors, who drew near, "I was good-natured enough to allow my name to be mixed up in an affair like that."

And as Saccard and Mareuil came up to them:

"I was telling these gentlemen the regrettable catastrophe of the Société Générale of the Ports of Morocco; you know, Saccard?"

The latter did not flinch. The company in question had just collapsed amid a terrible scandal. Over-inquisitive shareholders had insisted on learning what progress had been made with the establishment of the famous commercial stations on the Mediterranean sea-board, and a judicial enquiry had shown that the Ports of Morocco existed only on the plans of the engineers: very handsome plans hung on the walls of the Company's offices. Since then M. Toutin-Laroche had been clamouring more loudly than the shareholders, waxing indignant, demanding that his name

should be restored to him without a stain. And he made so much noise that the Government, in order to calm this useful man and restore him in the eyes of public opinion, decided to send him to the Senate. It was thus that he fished up the so greatly coveted seat, in an affair that had very nearly involved him in a criminal trial.

"It is very kind of you to be interested in that," said Saccard, "when you can point to your great work, the Crédit Viticole, a concern that has emerged triumphantly from every crisis."

"Yes," murmured Mareuil, "that is an answer to everything."

As a matter of fact the Crédit Viticole had just issued from a serious but carefully concealed embarrassment. A minister who was very tenderly disposed towards this financial institution, which held the Municipality of Paris by the throat, had forced on a bulling operation which M. Toutin-Laroche had turned to wonderfully good account. Nothing flattered him more sweetly than the praise bestowed upon the prosperity of the Crédit Viticole. As a rule he provoked it. He thanked M. de Mareuil with a glance, and bending over the Baron Gouraud, on whose armchair he was familiarly leaning, he asked him:

"Are you comfortable? You're not too warm?"

The baron gave a slight grunt.

"He is breaking up, he is breaking up day by day," added M. Toutin-Laroche, in an undertone, turning towards the other gentlemen.

M. Michelin smiled, threw down his eyelids from time to time, gently, so as to look at his red ribbon. The Mignon and Charrier couple, planted squarely upon their big feet, seemed much more at their ease in their dress-clothes since they had taken to wearing diamonds. However, it was nearly midnight, and the company was growing impatient; it was not so ill-bred as to murmur, but the fans fluttered more nervously, and the sound of conversations increased.

At last M. Hupel de la Noue reappeared. He had passed one shoulder through the narrow opening when he perceived Madame

d'Espanet at length ascending the platform; the other ladies, already posed for the first picture, were only waiting for her. The préfet turned round, showing his back to the audience, and he could be seen talking to the marquise, who was concealed by the curtains. He lowered his voice, and with compliments blown from his finger-tips, said:

"My congratulations, marquise. Your costume is delicious."

"I have a much prettier one underneath!" replied she, bluntly, laughing in his face, so funny did he seem to her, buried as he was in draperies.

"Ah, charming, charming!" he murmured, with an air of rapture.

He dropped the corner of the curtain, he went and joined the group of serious men, desiring to enjoy his work. He was no longer the man running with haggard face in search of Echo's girdle of leaves. He beamed, and panted, and wiped his forehead. He still had the mark of the little white hand on the sleeve of his coat; and moreover the thumb of his right-hand glove was stained with red at the tip; he had no doubt dipped his thumb into one of those ladies' make-up boxes. He smiled, he fanned himself, he stammered out:

"She is adorable, enchanting, astounding!"

"Who is?" asked Saccard.

"The marquise. What do you think she said to me just now . . . ?"

And he told the story. It was considered quite perfect. The gentlemen repeated it to one another. Even the dignified M. Haffner, who had drawn nearer, could not prevent himself from applauding. Meanwhile, a piano, which few of the people had noticed, began to play a waltz. Then there came a great silence. The waltz had endless, capricious variations; and a very soft phrase ever mounted from the keyboard, finishing in a nightingale's trill; then deeper notes took up the theme, more slowly. It was very voluptuous. The ladies, their heads a little to one side, smiled. On the other hand the piano had put a sudden stop

to M. Hupel de la Noue's merriment. He looked anxiously towards the red velvet curtains, he said to himself that he ought to have posed Madame d'Espanet himself, as he had posed the others.

The curtains opened slowly, the piano resumed the waltz, with the soft pedal down. A murmur sped through the drawing-room. The ladies leant forward, the men stretched out their necks, whilst admiration displayed itself here and there by a word too loudly spoken, an unconscious sigh, a stifled laugh. This lasted for fully five minutes, under the glare of the three chandeliers.

M. Hupel de la Noue, relieved, beamed beatifically upon his poem. He could not resist the temptation to repeat to the people around him what he had been saying for a month past:

"I did think of doing it in verse . . . . But, don't you agree with me, it's more dignified like this . . . ."

Then, while the waltz rose and fell in an endless lullaby, he explained. The Mignon and Charrier couple had drawn nearer and were listening attentively.

"You know the subject, don't you? The beauteous Narcissus, son of the River Cephisus and of the Nymph Liriope, scorns the love of the Nymph Echo . . . . Echo was an attendant of Juno, whom she amused with her speeches while Jupiter was roving about the world . . . . Echo, daughter of the Air and the Earth, as you know . . . ."

And he went into transports over the poetry of mythology. Then, more confidentially:

"I thought I might give rein to my imagination . . . . The Nymph Echo leads the beauteous Narcisse to Venus in a grotto on the sea-shore, so that the goddess may inflame him with her fire. But the goddess is powerless. The young man indicates by his attitude that he is not touched."

The explanation was not out of place, for few of the spectators in the drawing-room understood the exact meaning of the groups. When the préfet had named the characters in an under-

tone the admiration increased. The Mignon and Charrier couple continued to stare with wide-open eyes. They had not understood.

On the platform, between the red velvet curtains, yawned a grotto. The scenery was made of silk stretched in large broken plaits, imitating the anfractuosity of rocks, upon which were painted shells, fishes and large sea-plants. The stage, broken up, rose in the shape of a hillock, and was covered with the same silk, upon which the scene-painter had depicted a fine sand ground, constellated with pearls and silver spangles. It was a retreat fit for a goddess. There on the top of the hillock, stood Mme. de Lauwerens as Venus; rather stout, wearing her pink tights with the dignity of an Olympian duchess, she interpreted her part of the Queen of Love with large, severe, devouring eyes. Behind her, showing only her mischievous head, her wings and her quiver, little Mme. Daste lent her smile to the amiable character of Cupid. Then on one side of the hillock, the three Graces, Mmes. de Guende, Teissière and de Meinhold, all in muslin, stood smiling and intertwined as in Pradier's group; while on the other side, the Marquise d'Espanet and Mme. Haffner, enveloped in the same flow of lace, their arms round each other's waists, their hair intermingled, gave a risky note to the picture, a reminiscence of Lesbos, which M. Hupel de la Noue explained in a lower voice, for the benefit of the men only, saying that he intended by this to show the extent of Venus's power. At the foot of the hillock, the Countess Vanska impersonated Voluptuousness; she lay outstretched, twisted by a final spasm, her eyes half closed and languishing, as though satiated; very dark, she had unloosened her black hair, and her bodice, streaked with tawny flames, showed portions of her glowing skin. The scale of colour of the costumes, from the snowy white of Venus's veil to the dark-red of Voluptuousness' bodice, was soft, generally pink, flesh-coloured. And under the electric ray, ingeniously cast upon the stage from one of the garden windows, the gauze, the lace, all those light, diaphanous materials mingled so well

with the shoulders and tights that those pink whitenesses seemed alive, and one was no longer certain that the ladies had not carried the plastic truth so far as to strip themselves quite naked.

All this was but the apotheosis; the play was enacted in the foreground. On the left Renée, as Echo, stretched out her arms towards the tall goddess, her head half turned towards Narcissus, pleadingly, as though to invite him to look at Venus, the mere sight of whom kindles such irresistible fires; but Narcissus, on the right, made a gesture of refusal, hid his eyes with his hand, remained cold as ice. The costumes of these two characters in particular had cost M. Hupel de la Noue's imagination infinite trouble. Narcissus, as a wandering demi-god of the forests, wore an ideal huntsman's dress: green tights, a short, clinging jacket, a leafy twig of oak in his hair. The dress of Echo was quite an allegory in itself; it suggested tall trees and lofty mountains, the resounding spots where the voices of the Earth and the Air reply to each other; it was rock in the white satin of the skirt, thicket in the leaves of the girdle, clear sky in the cloud of blue gauze of the bodice. And the groups retained a statuesque immobility, the fleshly note of Olympus sang in the effulgence of the broad ray of light, while the piano continued its penetrating complaint of love, interspersed with deep sighs.

It was generally conceded that Maxime was beautifully made. In making his gesture of refusal, he accentuated his left hip, which was much noticed. But all the praise was for Renée's expression of feature. In M. Hupel de la Noue's phrase, she typified "the pangs of unsatisfied desire." She wore a bitter smile that tried to look humble, she sought her prey with the entreaties of a she-wolf who but half hides her teeth. The first tableau went off well, but for that madcap of an Adeline, who moved and who scarcely repressed an irresistible desire to laugh. At last the curtains were closed, the piano ceased.

Then the audience applauded discreetly, and the conversations were resumed. A great breath of love, of restrained desire, had

come from the nudities on the stage, and hovered through the drawing-room, where the women leaned more languidly in their seats, while the men spoke low in each other's ears, with smiles. There was whispering as in an alcove, a well-bred semi-silence, a longing for voluptuousness barely formulated by a trembling of lips; and in the mute looks exchanged amid this decorous rapture there was the frank boldness of delights offered and accepted with a glance.

Endless judgments were passed on the ladies' good points. Their costumes assumed an importance almost equal to that of their shoulders. When the Mignon and Charrier couple turned to question M. Hupel de la Noue, they were quite surprised to find him no longer beside them; he had already dived behind the platform.

"As I was telling you, my beautiful pet," said Madame Sidonie, resuming a conversation interrupted by the first tableau, "I have received a letter from London, about that business of the three milliards, you know . . . . The person I employed to make enquiries writes that he thinks he has found the banker's receipt. England must have paid . . . . It has made me ill all day."

She was in fact yellower than usual, in her sorceress's robe sprinkled with stars. And as Madame Michelin did not listen to her, she continued in a lower voice, muttering that it was impossible that England had paid, and that she should certainly go to London herself.

"Narcissus' dress is very pretty, is it not?" asked Louise of Madame Michelin.

The latter smiled. She looked at the Baron Gouraud, who seemed quite cheerful again in his arm-chair. Madame Sidonie, observing the direction of her glance, leant over, whispered in her ear, so that the child might not hear:

"Has he settled up?"

"Yes," replied the young woman, languishing, playing her alme part delightfully. "I have chosen the house at Louvecien-

nes, and I have received the title-deeds from his man of business . . . . But we have broken off, I no longer see him."

Louise was particularly sharp at catching what she was not intended to hear. She looked at the Baron Gouraud with a page's boldness, and said quietly to Madame Michelin:

"Don't you think the baron looks hideous?"

Then she added, with a burst of laughter:

"I say! they ought to have made him play Narcissus. He would have been delicious in apple-green tights."

The sight of Venus, of this voluptuous corner of Olympus, had in fact revived the old senator. He rolled delighted eyes, turned half round to compliment Saccard. Amidst the buzz that filled the drawing-room, the group of serious men continued to talk business and politics. M. Haffner said he had just been appointed chairman of a jury charged with settling questions of indemnities. Then the conversation turned upon the works of Paris, upon the Boulevard du Prince-Eugène, which was beginning to be discussed seriously in public. Saccard seized the opportunity to speak of somebody he knew, a landlord who would no doubt be expropriated. And he looked the gentleman straight in the face. The baron slowly wagged his head; M. Toutin-Laroche went so far as to declare that there was nothing so unpleasant as to be expropriated; M. Michelin agreed, squinted more than ever as he looked at his decoration.

"The indemnity can never be too high," learnedly concluded M. de Mareuil, who wished to please Saccard.

They had understood one another. But the Mignon and Charrier couple brought their own affairs forward. They meant to retire soon, they said, no doubt to Langres, keeping on an occasional lodging in Paris. They made the other gentlemen smile when they related how, after completing the building of their magnificent mansion in the Boulevard Malesherbes, they had thought it so handsome that they had not been able to resist the longing to sell it. Their diamonds must have been a consolation that they had offered themselves. Saccard laughed with a bad

grace; his former partners had just realized enormous profits in an affair in which he had played the part of a dupe. And as the entr'acte grew longer, phrases in praise of Venus's bosom and Echo's costume penetrated through the conversation of the serious men.

After more than half an hour, M. Hupel de la Noue reappeared. He was on the high road to success, and the disorder of his attire increased. As he regained his place, he came across M. de Mussy. He shook hands with him in passing; then he turned back and asked him:

"Haven't you heard what the marquise said?"

And, without waiting for his reply, he told him the story. He appreciated it more and more, he criticized it, he ended by thinking it exquisite in its candour. "I have a much prettier one underneath!" It was a cry from the heart.

But M. de Mussy did not hold the same opinion. He considered the remark indecent. He had just been attached to the London embassy, where the minister had told him that an austere demeanour was expected. He refused to lead the cotilon, he made himself old, he no longer spoke of his love for Renée, to whom he bowed gravely when he met her.

M. Hupel de la Noue had come up to the group standing behind the baron's arm-chair, when the piano struck up a triumphal march. A loud burst of harmony, produced by masterful strokes on the keyboard, preluded a full melody in which a metallic clang at intervals resounded. As each phrase was finished, it was repeated in a higher key that accentuated the rhythm. It was at once fierce and joyous.

"You will see," murmured M. Hupel de la Noue; "I have perhaps carried poetic licence rather far, but I think my audacity has succeeded. . . . The nymph Echo, seeing that Venus is powerless over the beauteous Narcissus, leads him to Plutus, the god of wealth and precious metals . . . . After the temptation of the flesh, the temptation of riches."

"That's very classical," replied the spare M. Toutin-Laroche,

with an amiable simper. "You know your period, monsieur the préfet."

The curtains parted, the piano played more loudly. It was a dazzling picture. The electric ray fell on a blazing splendour in which the spectators at first saw nothing but a brazier, in which precious stones and ingots of gold seemed to be fusing. A new grotto was shown; but this was not the cool retreat of Venus, lapped by the waters eddying on fine sand sprinkled with pearls, but one situated seemingly in the centre of the earth, in a nether, fiery region, a fissure of the hell of antiquity, a crevice in a mine of molten metals inhabited by Plutus. The silk simulating the rock showed broad threads of metal, layers that looked like the veins of the primeval world, loaded with riches incalculable and the eternal life of the soil. On the ground, thanks to a bold anachronism of M. Hupel de la Noue's, lay an avalanche of twenty-franc pieces, louis spread-out, louis heaped-up, a swarm of ascending louis.

On the top of this heap of gold sat Mme. de Guende, as Plutus, a female Plutus, a Plutus showing her bosom set in the great stripes of her dress which imitated all the metals. Around the god, erect, reclining, grouped in clusters, blooming apart, were posed the fairy-like flora of this grotto, into which the caliphs of the Arabian Nights seemed to have emptied their treasures: Mme. Haffner, as Gold, with a stiff and resplendent skirt like a bishop's cope; Mme. d'Espanet, as Silver, gleaming like moonlight; Mme. de Lauwerens, in bright blue, as a Sapphire, with by her side little Mme. Daste, a smiling Turquoise in tenderest blue; then there followed an Emerald, Mme. de Meinhold; a Topaz, Mme. Teissière; and lower down, the Comtess Vanska, lending her dark ardour to a Coral, recumbent, with raised arms loaded with rosy pendants, resembling a monstrous, seductive polyp which displayed a woman's flesh amidst the yawning pink pearliness of its shell. These ladies wore necklaces, bracelets, complete sets of jewels, formed of the precious stones they respectively impersonated. Especially noticeable were the quaint orna-

ments of Mmes. d'Espanet and Haffner, contrived entirely of small gold coins and small silver coins fresh from the mint. In the foreground the story remained unchanged: the Nymph Echo still tempted the beauteous Narcissus, who refused with the same gesture. And the eyes of the spectators grew accustomed with delight to this yawning cavity opening on to the inflamed bowels of the earth, to this heap of gold on which lay sprawling the riches of a world.

This second tableau was still more successful than the first. It seemed particularly ingenious. The audacity of the twenty-franc pieces, this stream from a modern safe that had fallen into a corner of Greek mythology, enchanted the imagination of the ladies and financiers present. The words, "What a heap of pieces! what a lot of money!" flitted around, with smiles, with long quivers of satisfaction; and assuredly each of those ladies, each of those gentlemen, dreamt of owning all this money himself, coffered in his cellar.

"England has paid up; there are your milliards," maliciously whispered Louise in Mme. Sidonie's ear.

And Mme. Michelin, her mouth slightly parted with enraptured desire, threw back her alme's veil, fondled the gold with glittering eyes, while the group of serious men went into transports. M. Toutin-Laroche, beaming all over, whispered a few words in the ear of the baron, whose face was becoming mottled with yellow patches. But the Mignon and Charrier couple, less discreet, said with coarse candour:

"Damn it! there's enough there to pull down all Paris and build it up again."

The remark seemed a deep one to Saccard, who began to suspect that the Mignon and Charrier pair made fun of people under the guise of idiocy. When the curtains once more fell to, and the piano finished its triumphal march with a loud tumult of notes thrown pell-mell, like last shovelfuls of crown-pieces, the applause burst forth louder, more prolonged.

Meantime, in the middle of the tableau, the minister, accom-

panied by his secretary, M. de Saffré, had appeared at the door of the drawing-room. Saccard, who was impatiently looking out for his brother, wanted to rush forward to welcome him. But the latter, with a movement of the hand, begged him not to stir. And he slowly approached the group of serious men. When the curtains had closed, and he was recognized, a long whisper travelled round the drawing-room, all heads looked round: the minister counterbalanced the success of *Les Amours du beau Narcisse et de la Nymphe Écho.*

"You are a poet, monsieur préfet," he said, smiling, to M. Hupel de la Noue. "You once published a volume of verse, *Les Volubilis,* I believe? . . . I see the cares of administration have not drained your imagination."

The préfet detected, in this compliment, the sting of an epigram. The sudden advent of his chief disconcerted him, the more so as, on giving a glance to see if his dress was in order, he noticed on the sleeve of his coat the little white hand, which he did not dare to brush off. He bowed, stammered.

"Really," continued the minister, addressing M. Toutin-Laroche, the Baron Gouraud, the other personages present, "all that gold was a wonderful spectacle . . . . We should be able to do great things if M. Hupel de la Noue would coin money for us."

This was, in ministerial language, the same remark as that of the Mignon and Charrier couple. Then M. Toutin-Laroche and the others paid their court, rung the changes on the minister's last phrase: the Empire had done wonders already; it was not gold that was wanting, thanks to the great experience of the government; never had France stood so high in the councils of Europe; and the gentlemen ended by uttering such platitudes that the minister himself changed the conversation. He listened to them with his head erect, the corners of his mouth a little raised, which gave to his fat, white, clean-shaven face an expression of dubiousness and smiling disdain.

Saccard manœuvred so as to find an excuse to change the subject and to make his announcement of the marriage of Maxime and Louise. He assumed an air of great familiarity, and his brother, with mock geniality, was good-natured enough to help him by pretending great affection for him. He was really the superior of the two, with his steady gaze, his evident contempt for petty rascality, his broad shoulders, which, with a shrug, could have floored all that crew. When at last the marriage came into question, he became charming, he let it be understood that he had his wedding-present ready; he was so good as to talk of Maxime's being appointed an auditor to the Council of State. He went so far as twice to repeat to his brother, with an air of absolute good-fellowship:

"Tell your son I will be his witness."

M. de Mareuil crimsoned with delight. Saccard was congratulated. M. Toutin-Laroche offered himself as a second witness. Then, suddenly, they began to talk of divorce. A member of the opposition, said M. Haffner, had just had "the lamentable audacity" to defend this social scandal. And every one protested. Their sense of propriety found vent in profound observations. M. Michelin smiled faintly upon the minister, while the Mignon and Charrier couple noted with astonishment that the collar of his dress-coat was worn.

Meanwhile M. Hupel de la Noue remained ill at ease, leaning against the arm-chair of the Baron Gouraud, who had contented himself with silently shaking hands with the minister. The poet dared not leave the spot. An indefinable feeling, the dread of appearing ridiculous, the fear of losing the good graces of his chief detained him, despite his furious desire to go and pose the ladies on the stage for the last tableau. He waited for some happy remark to occur to him and restore him to favour. But he could think of nothing. He felt more and more embarrassed when he perceived M. de Saffré; he took his arm, hooked himself on to him as to a live-saving plank. The young man had just arrived, he was a fresh victim.

"Haven't you heard what the marquise said?" asked the préfet.

But he was so perturbed that he no longer knew how to put the story spicily. He floundered.

"I said to her, 'You have a charming costume'; and she replied . . . ."

"'I have a much prettier one underneath,'" quietly added M. de Saffré. "It's old, my dear sir, very old."

M. Hupel de la Noue looked at him in consternation. The repartee was an old one, and he was just about still more deeply to penetrate into his commentary on the candour of this cry from the heart!

"Old," replied the secretary, "old as the hills: Mme. d'Espanet has already said it twice at the Tuileries."

This was the last straw. What did the Préfet care now for the minister, for the whole drawing-room? He turned to go towards the stage, when the piano played a prelude, in a sad tone, with the trembling of notes that weep; then the plaintive strain expanded, dragged on at length, and the curtains parted. M. Hupel de la Noue, who had already half disappeared, returned to the drawing-room when he heard the soft grating of the curtain-rings. He was pale, exasperated; he made a violent effort to keep himself from apostrophizing the ladies. They had posed themselves without him! It must have been that little d'Espanet woman who had egged them on to hasten the changes of dress and dispense with his assistance. It was all wrong, it was worth nothing at all!

He returned, mumbling inarticulate words. He looked at the stage, shrugging his shoulders, muttering:

"Echo is too near the edge . . . . And Narcissus's leg, it's not dignified, not dignified in the least . . . ."

The Mignon and Charrier couple, who had drawn near in order to hear "the explanation," ventured to ask him "What the young man and the young girl were doing, lying down on the

ground." But he made no reply, he refused to explain his poem any further; and as the contractors insisted:

"Why, it no longer concerns me, since those ladies choose to hurt my neck so."

The piano sobbed softly. On the stage, a glade, into which the electric ray threw a sheet of sunlight, revealed a vista of foliage. It was an ideal glade, with blue trees, big yellow and red flowers, that rose as high as the oaks. There, on a grassy mound, lay Venus and Plutus, side by side, surrounded by nymphs who had hastened from the neighbouring thickets to serve as their escort. There were daughters of the trees, daughters of the springs, daughters of the mountains, all the laughing, naked divinities of the forest. And the god and goddess triumphed, punished the indifference of the proud one who had scorned them, while the group of nymphs looked on curiously and with pious affright at the vengeance of Olympus in the foreground. There the drama was unfolded. The beauteous Narcissus, lying on the margin of a brook that came down from the back of the stage, was contemplating himself in the limpid mirror; and realism had been carried so far that a strip of real looking-glass had been placed at the bottom of the brook. But he had already ceased to be the free stripling, the forest wanderer. Death surprised him in the midst of his rapt admiration of his own image, Death enervated him, and Venus, with outstretched finger, like a fairy in a transformation-scene, hurled the fatal doom at his head. He was turning into a flower. His limbs became verdant, elongated, in his tight-fitting dress of green satin; the flexible stalk, formed by his legs slightly bent, was on the point of sinking into the ground and taking root, while his body, adorned with broad lappets of white satin, blossomed into a wondrous corolla. Maxime's fair hair completed the illusion, and with its long curls set yellow pistils amid the whiteness of the petals. And the great nascent flower, still human, inclined its head towards the spring, its eyes moistened, its countenance smil-

ing with voluptuous ecstasy, as though the beauteous Narcissus had at last in death satisfied the passion with which he had inspired himself. A few paces off the nymph Echo was dying also, dying of unquenched desire; she found herself little by little caught in the hardness of the ground, she felt her burning limbs freezing and hardening. She was no vulgar moss-stained rock, but one of white marble, through her arms and shoulders, through her long snow-white robe, from which the girdle of leaves and the blue drapery had glided down. Sinking amid the satin of her skirt, which was creased in large folds, like a block of Parian marble, she threw herself back, retaining nothing of life, in her cold sculptured body, save her woman's eyes, eyes that gleamed, fixed on the flower of the waters, reclining languidly above the mirror of the spring. And it already seemed as if all the love-sounds of the forest, the long-drawn voices of the thickets, the mystic shivers of the leaves, the deep sighs of the tall oaks, came and beat upon the marble flesh of the Nymph Echo, whose heart, still bleeding within the block, resounded evermore, repeating afar the slightest complaints of Earth or Air.

"Oh, how they have rigged out that poor Maxime!" murmured Louise. "And Madame Saccard, she looks like a corpse."

"She is covered with rice-powder," said Madame Michelin.

Other remarks flitted about of a hardly complimentary nature. This third tableau had not the unqualified success of the two others. And yet it was this tragic ending that filled M. Hupel de la Noue with enthusiasm for his own talent. He admired himself in it as did his Narcissus in his strip of looking-glass. He had put into it a crowd of poetical and philosophical allusions. When the curtains were closed for the last time, and the spectators had applauded in a well-bred way, he felt a mortal regret at having yielded to anger and not explained the last page of his poem. Then he essayed to give to the people about him the key to the charming, grandiose, or simply naughty ideas represented by the beauteous Narcissus and the Nymph Echo, and he even tried to say what Venus and Plutus were doing at the bottom of the

glade; but these ladies and gentlemen, whose clear, practical minds had understood the grotto of flesh and the grotto of gold, did not care to go into the préfet's mythological complications. Only the Mignon and Charrier couple, who had made up their minds to know, had the good-nature to question him. He took possession of them, and kept them standing for nearly two hours in a window-recess while he related to them Ovid's "Metamorphoses."

Meantime the minister departed. He apologized for not being able to stay and compliment the beautiful Madame Saccard on the perfect grace of her Nymph Echo. He had gone three or four times round the drawing-room on his brother's arm, shaking hands with people, bowing to the ladies. Never had he compromised himself so much for Saccard. He left him radiant when, on the threshold, he said to him in a loud voice:

"I shall expect you to-morrow morning. Come to breakfast."

The ball was about to begin. The servants had ranged the ladies' chairs along the walls. The large drawing-room now displayed, from the small yellow drawing-room to the stage, its bare carpet, whose big purple flowers opened out under the dripping light that fell from the crystal of the chandeliers. The heat increased, the reflection of the red hangings burnished the gilt of the furniture and the ceiling. To open the ball they were waiting for the ladies, the Nymph Echo, Venus, Plutus and the rest, to change their costumes.

Madame d'Espanet and Madame Haffner were the first to appear. They had resumed the dresses they wore in the second tableau; one was Gold, the other Silver. They were surrounded, congratulated; and they related their emotions.

"As for me, I almost exploded with laughter," said the marquise, "when I saw M. Toutin-Laroche's big nose looking at me from the distance!"

"I believe I've got a crick in my neck," drawled the fair-haired Suzanne. "No, on my word, if it had lasted a minute

longer, I would have put my head back into a natural position, it pose without consulting me! "

From the recess into which he had driven the Mignon and Charrier couple, M. Hupel de la Noue cast restless glances at the group formed around the two ladies; he feared he was being ridiculed. The other nymphs arrived one after the other; all had resumed their costumes as precious stones; the Comtesse Vanska, as Coral, achieved a stupendous success when the ingenious details of her dress were closely examined. Then Maxime entered, faultless in dress-clothes, with a smiling air; and a flow of women enveloped him, he was placed in the centre of the circle, he was joked about his floral character, about his passion for mirrors; while he, unembarrassed, as though delighted with his part, continued to smile, joked back, confessed that he adored himself, and that he was sufficiently cured of women to prefer himself to them. The laughter grew louder, the group grew larger, took up the whole of the middle of the drawing-room, while the young man, lost in this mob of shoulders, in this medley of dazzling costumes, retained his fragrance of depraved love, the gentleness of a pale, vicious flower.

But when Renée at length came down, there was a semi-silence. She had put on a new costume of such original grace and so audacious that the ladies and the men, however accustomed to her eccentricities, gave a sudden movement of surprise. She was dressed as an Otaheitan belle. This dress, it would seem, is by way of being very primitive: a pair of soft tinted tights, that reached from her feet to her breasts, leaving her arms and shoulders bare, and over these tights a simple muslin blouse, short, and trimmed with two flounces so as to hide the hips a little. A wreath of wild flowers in her hair; gold bangles on her wrists and ankles. And nothing more. She was naked. The tights had the suppleness of flesh under the muslin blouse; the pure naked outline was visible, vaguely bedimmed by the flounces from the arm-pits to the knees, but at the slightest movement reappearing and accentuating itself between the meshes of the

lace. She was an adorable savage, a barbarous and voluptuous wanton, barely hidden beneath a white haze, a blurr of sea-fog, beneath which her whole body could be divined.

Renée, with rosy cheeks, came briskly forward. Céleste had managed to split the first pair of tights; fortunately Renée, foreseeing this eventuality, had taken her precautions. The torn tights had delayed her. She seemed to care little for her triumph. Her hands burned, her eyes glittered with fever. She smiled, however, answered briefly the men who stopped her, who complimented her on the chasteness of her attitudes in the tableaux-vivants. She left in her wake a trail of dress-coats astounded and charmed at the transparency of her muslin blouse. When she had reached the group of women surrounding Maxime, she occasioned short cries of admiration, and the marquise began to eye her from head to foot, amorously murmuring:

"She is deliciously made."

Madame Michelin, whose alme dress became hideously ponderous beside this simple veil, pursed her lips, while Madame Sidonie, shrivelled up in her black sorceress's dress, whispered in her ear:

"It's the height of indecency: don't you think so, you beautiful thing?"

"Well!" said the pretty brunette at last, "how angry M. Michelin would be if I undressed myself like that."

"And quite right too," concluded the business woman.

The band of serious men was not of this opinion. They indulged in ecstasies at a distance. M. Michelin, whom his wife had so inappropriately quoted, went into transports, in order to please M. Toutin-Laroche and the Baron Gouraud, whom the sight of Renée enraptured. Saccard was greatly complimented on the perfection of his wife's figure. He bowed, he professed to be very much overcome. The evening was an auspicious one for him, and but for a preoccupation that flitted through his eyes at moments when he threw a rapid glance towards his sister, he would have appeared perfectly happy.

"I say, she never showed us so much as that before," said Louise, jestingly, in Maxime's ear, glancing towards Renée.

She corrected herself, and added, with a mystifying smile:

"At least, to me."

The young man looked at her with an air of alarm, but she continued smiling, comically, like a schoolboy delighted with a rather broad joke.

The ball began. The stage of the tableaux-vivants had been utilized to accommodate a small band, in which brass predominated; and the clear notes of the horns and cornets rang out in the ideal forest with the blue trees. First came a quadrille: "*Ah, il a des bottes, il a des bottes, Bastien!*" which was at that time sending the ball-rooms into raptures. The ladies danced. Polkas, waltzes, mazurkas alternated with the quadrilles. The swinging couples passed and repassed, filling the long gallery, bounding beneath the lash of the brass, swaying to the lullaby of the violins. The fancy dresses, this flow of women of every country and of every period, rocked to and fro in a swarming medley of bright materials. After mingling and carrying off the colours in cadenced confusion, the rhythm, at certain strokes of the bow, abruptly brought back the same pink satin tunic, the same blue velvet bodice, side by side with the same black coat. Then another stroke of the bows, a blast of the cornets pushed the couples on, made them travel in files around the drawing-room with the swinging motion of a rowing-boat drifting under the impulse of the wind, which has snapped her painter. And so on, endlessly, for hours. Sometimes, between two dances, a lady went up to a window, suffocating, to inhale a little of the icy air; a couple rested on a sofa in the small buttercup drawing-room or went into the conservatory, strolling slowly round the pathways. Skirts, their edges alone visible, wore languid smiles under the arbours of creepers, in the depths of the tepid shadow, where the *forte* notes of the cornets penetrated during the quadrilles of "*Ohé les p'tits agneaux!*" and "*J'ai un pied qui r'mue!*"

When the servants opened the door of the dining-room, transformed into a refreshment buffet, with sideboards against the walls and a long table in the middle, laden with cold things, there was a push and a crush. A fine tall man, who had bashfully kept his hat in his hand, was so violently flattened against the wall that the wretched hat burst with a pitiful moan. This made the others laugh. They rushed at the pastry and the truffled game, brutally digging their elbows into one another's sides. It was a sack, hands met in the middle of dishes, and the lackeys did not know to whom to attend of this band of well-bred men, whose out-stretched arms expressed the one fear of arriving too late and finding the dishes empty. An old gentleman grew angry because there was no claret, and champagne, he maintained, kept him awake.

"Gently, messieurs, gently," said Baptiste, in his serious voice. "There will be enough for every one."

But nobody listened. The dining-room was full, and anxious dress-coats stood on tiptoe at the door. Before the sideboards stood groups, eating quickly, crowding together. Many swallowed their food without drinking, not having been able to lay their hands on a glass. Others, on the contrary, drank and sought fruitlessly for a morsel of bread.

"Listen," said M. Hupel de la Noue, whom the Mignon and Charrier couple, sick of mythology, had dragged to the supper-room, "we shan't get a thing if we don't club together . . . . It's much worse at the Tuileries, and I've gained experience there . . . . You look after the wine, I'll see to the solids."

The préfet had his eye on a leg of mutton. He stretched out his arm at the right moment through a break in the shoulders, and quietly carried it off, after stuffing his pockets with rolls. The contractors returned on their side, Mignon with one bottle, Charrier with two bottles of champagne; but they had only been able to find two glasses; they said that didn't matter, they would drink out of the same. And the party supped off the corner of a flower-stand, at the end of the room. They did not even take off

their gloves, but put the slices already cut from the leg of mutton between their bread, and kept the bottles under their arms. And standing up, they talked with their mouths full, stretching out their chins beyond their waistcoats so as to let the gravy fall on the carpet.

Charrier, having finished his wine before his bread, asked a servant to get him a glass of champagne.

"You will have to wait, monsieur!" angrily replied the scared domestic, losing his head, forgetting that he was not in the kitchen. "They have drunk up three hundred bottles already."

Meantime the notes of the band could be heard swelling with sudden gusts. They were dancing the Kisses Polka, famous at public balls, the rhythm of which each dancer had to mark by saluting his partner. Mme. d'Espanet appeared at the door of the dining-room, flushed, her hair a little disarranged, trailing her long silver dress with a charming air of lassitude. Hardly any one moved aside, she was obliged to push with her elbows to effect a passage. Then she came straight up to M. Hupel de la Noue, who had finished, and who was wiping his mouth with his handkerchief.

"It would be so good of you, monsieur," she said with a bewitching smile, "if you would find me a chair. I have been all round the table in vain . . . ."

The préfet had a grudge against the marquise, but his gallantry gave him no alternative: he bustled about, found the chair, installed Mme. d'Espanet, and stayed behind her to wait on her. She would only take a few prawns, with a little butter, and half a glass of champagne. She ate daintily amid the gluttony of the men. The table and the chairs were reserved exclusively for the ladies. But an exception was always made in favour of the Baron Gouraud. There he was, comfortably seated in front of a piece of game-pie of which his jaws were slowly munching the crust. The marquise re-subjugated the préfet by telling him that she would never forget her artistic emotions in *Les Amours du Beau Narcisse et de la Nymphe Écho*. She even explained to him

why they had not waited for him, in a way that completely consoled him: the ladies, on learning that the minister was there, thought it would not be very proper to prolong the entr'acte. She ended by begging him to go and look for Mme. Haffner, who was dancing with Mr. Simpson, a brute of a man, she said, whom she disliked. And when Suzanne had come, she no longer had an eye for M. Hupel de la Noue.

Saccard, followed by MM. Toutin-Laroche, de Mareuil, Haffner, had taken possession of a sideboard. As there was no room at the table, and M. de Saffré passed with Madame Michelin on his arm, he stopped them and insisted that the pretty brunette should join his party. She nibbled at some pastry, smiling, raising her bright eyes to the five men who surrounded her. They leant over her, touched her alme's veils embroidered with threads of gold, drove her up against the sideboard against which she ended by leaning, taking cakes from every hand, very gently and very caressing, with the amorous docility of a slave amid her masters. M. Michelin, all alone at the other end of the room, was finishing up a pot of pâté de foie gras which he had succeeded in capturing.

Meantime Mme. Sidonie, who had been prowling about ever since the first strokes of the bow had opened the ball, entered the dining-room and beckoned to Saccard with a glance.

"She is not dancing," she said, in a low voice. "She seems restless. I believe she is meditating something desperate . . . . But I have not yet been able to discover the spark . . . . I must have something to eat and return to the watch."

And standing up, like a man, she ate a wing of a chicken which she got M. Michelin, who had finished his pâté, to give her. She poured herself out a large champagne-glass full of malaga, and then, after wiping her lips with her fingers, she returned to the drawing-room. The train of her sorceress's dress seemed already to have gathered up all the dust of the carpets.

The ball grew languid, the band was showing signs of fatigue, when a murmur circulated: "The cotillon! the cotillon!"

putting fresh life into the dancers and the brass. Couples came from all the shrubberies in the hot-house; the large drawing-room filled up as for the first quadrille; and there was a discussion among the awakened crowd. It was the last flicker of the ball. The men who were not dancing watched with limp good-nature from the depths of the window-recesses the talkative group swelling in the middle of the room; while the supper-eaters in the next room stretched out their necks to see, without relinquishing their food.

"M. de Mussy says he won't," said a lady. "He swears he never leads the cotillon now . . . . Come, just once more, Monsieur de Mussy, only this little once. Do, to oblige us."

But the young attaché remained stiff and serious in his stick-up collar. It was really impossible, he had taken a vow. Disappointment followed. Maxime refused also, saying that he could not possibly, that he was worn out. M. Hupel de la Noue dared not offer his services; his frivolity stopped at poetry. A lady suggesting Mr. Simpson was promptly silenced; Mr. Simpson was the most extraordinary cotillon-leader you ever saw; he gave himself over to fantastic and mischievous devices; at one dance where they had been so imprudent as to select him, it was said that he had compelled the ladies to jump over the chairs, and one of his favourite figures was to make everybody go round the room on all-fours.

"Has M. de Saffré gone?" asked a childish voice.

He was just going, he was saying good-bye to the beautiful Madame Saccard, with whom he was on the best of terms since she had refused to have anything to do with him. The amiable sceptic admired the caprices of others. He was brought back in triumph from the hall. He resisted, he said with a smile that they were compromising him, that he was a serious man. Then, in presence of all the white hands stretched out to him:

"Come," said he, "take your positions. . . . But I warn you, I belong to the old school. I haven't two farthings' worth of imagination."

The couples sat down around the room, on all the seats that could be gathered together; young men were even sent to fetch the iron chairs from the hot-house. It was a monster cotillon. M. de Saffré, who wore the rapt expression of a celebrant, chose for his partner the Comtesse Vanska, whose Coral dress fascinated him. When everybody was in position, he cast a long look at this circular row of skirts, each flanked by a dress-coat. And he nodded to the orchestra, whose brass resounded. Heads leaned forward along the smiling line of faces.

Renée refused to take part in the cotillon. She had been nervously gay since the commencement of the ball, scarcely dancing, mingling with the groups, unable to remain still. Her friends thought her odd. She had talked, during the evening, of making a balloon journey with a celebrated aeronaut in whom all Paris was interested. When the cotillon began, she was annoyed at no longer being able to walk about at her ease, she stationed herself at the door leading to the hall, shaking hands with the men who were leaving, talking with her husband's familiars. The Baron Gouraud, whom a lackey was carrying off in his fur cloak, found a last word of praise for Renée's Otaheitan dress.

Meanwhile, M. Toutin-Laroche shook Saccard's hand.

"Maxime reckons on you," said the latter.

"Quite so," replied the new senator.

And turning to Renée:

"Madame, I have forgotten to congratulate you . . . . So the dear boy is settled now!"

And as she gave a surprised smile:

"My wife doesn't know yet," said Saccard . . . . "We have this evening decided on the marriage between Mademoiselle de Mareuil and Maxime."

She continued smiling, bowing to M. Toutin-Laroche, who went off saying:

"You sign the contract on Sunday, don't you? I am going to Nevers on some mining business, but I shall be back in time."

Renée remained alone for a moment in the middle of the hall. She smiled no longer; and as she more deeply realized what she had just been told, she was seized with a great shiver. She looked with a fixed stare at the red velvet hangings, the rare plants, the majolica vases. Then she said out aloud:

"I must speak to him."

And she returned to the drawing-room. But she had to stay in the doorway. A figure of the cotillon barred the way. The band played a soft waltz-movement. The ladies, holding each other's hands, formed a ring like one of those rings of little girls singing, "*Giroflé girofla;*" and they danced round as quickly as possible, pulling at each other's arms, laughing, gliding. In the centre a gentleman—it was that mischievous Mr. Simpson—held a long pink scarf in his hand; he raised it, with the gesture of a fisherman about to cast his net; but he did not hurry, he seemed to think it amusing to let those ladies dance round and tire themselves. They panted and begged for mercy. Then he threw the scarf, and he threw it with such skill that it went and wound round the shoulders of Madame d'Espanet and Madame Haffner, who were dancing round side by side. It was one of the Yankee's jests. Next he wanted to waltz with both ladies at once, and he had already taken the two of them by the waist, one with his left arm, the other with his right, when M. de Saffré said, in his severe voice as cotillon-king:

"You can't dance with two ladies."

But Mr. Simpson refused to leave go of the two waists. Adeline and Suzanne threw themselves back in his arms, laughing. The point was argued, the ladies grew angry, the uproar was prolonged, and the dress-coats in the recesses of the windows asked themselves how Saffré proposed to extricate himself creditably from this dilemma. For a moment, in fact, he seemed perplexed, seeking by what refinement of grace he could win the laughers to his side. Then he gave a smile, he took Madame d'Espanet and Madame Haffner, each by one hand, whispered a

question in their ears, received their reply, and next addressing himself to Mr. Simpson:

" Do you pick verbena or periwinkle? "

Mr. Simpson, looking rather foolish, said that he picked verbena. Whereupon M. de Saffré handed him the marquise, saying:

" Here's your verbena."

There was discreet applause. They thought this very neat. M. de Saffré was a cotillon-leader " who was never at a loss," so the ladies said. In the meanwhile the band had with its full strength resumed the waltz air, and Mr. Simpson, after waltzing round the room with Madame d'Espanet, led her back to her seat.

Renée was able to pass. She had bitten her lips till the blood came, at the sight of all " this nonsense." She thought these men and women stupid to throw scarves about and call themselves by the names of plants. Her ears rang, a furious impatience gave her an abrupt desire to throw herself headlong forward and effect a passage. She crossed the drawing-room with a rapid step, jostling the belated couples returning to their seats. She went straight to the conservatory. She had seen neither Louise nor Maxime among the dancers, she said to herself that they must be there, in some nook of foliage, brought together by that instinct for fun and improprieties that made them seek out little corners as soon as they found themselves anywhere together. But she explored the dimness of the conservatory in vain. She only perceived, in the back of an arbour, a tall young man devoutly kissing little Madame Daste's hands, murmuring:

" Madame de Lauwerens was right: you're an angel! "

This declaration made in her house, in her conservatory, shocked her. Really Madame de Lauwerens ought to have taken her trade elsewhere! And Renée would have felt relieved could she have turned out of her rooms all these people who shouted so loudly. Standing before the tank, she looked at the water, she asked herself where Louise and Maxime could have

hidden themselves. The orchestra still played the same waltz, whose slow undulation made her feel sick. It was unendurable, not to be able to reflect in one's own house. She became confused. She forgot that the young people were not married yet, and she said to herself it was perfectly clear they had gone to bed. Then she thought of the dining-room, she quickly ran up the conservatory steps. But, at the door of the ball-room, she was for the second time stopped by a figure of the cotillon.

"This is the 'Dark Spots,' mesdames," said M. de Saffré, gallantly. "It is my own invention, and you shall be the first to have the benefit of it."

There was much laughter. The men explained the allusion to the ladies. The Emperor had just made a speech in which he had referred to the presence of "certain dark spots" on the horizon. These dark spots, for no appreciable reason, had had a great success. The Parisian wits had appropriated the expression so much so that for the past week the dark spots had been applied to everything. M. de Saffré placed the gentlemen at one end of the room, making them turn their backs on the ladies, who were left at the other end. Then he ordered them to pull up their coats so as to hide the backs of their heads. This performance was gone through amid the maddest merriment. Hunchbacked, their shoulders screwed up, their coat tails falling no lower than their waists, the cavaliers looked really hideous.

"Don't laugh, mesdames," cried M. de Saffré with most humorous seriousness, "or I shall make you put your skirts over your heads."

The gaiety redoubled. And he energetically availed himself of his sovereignty in respect of some of the gentlemen who refused to conceal the back of their necks.

"You are 'dark spots,'" he said, "hide your heads, show nothing but your backs, the ladies must see nothing but black. . . . Now walk about, mix yourselves, so that you may not be recognized."

Gaiety was at its highest. The "dark spots" went to and

fro, on their thin legs, with the swaying of headless crows. One gentleman's shirt showed, with a bit of brace. Then the ladies begged for mercy, they were dying with laughter, and M. de Saffré graciously ordered them to go and fetch the " dark spots." They flew off, like a covey of partridges, with a loud rustle of skirts. Then at the end of her run each seized hold of the cavalier nearest at hand. It was an indescribable hurly-burly. And one after the other the improvised couples disengaged themselves, waltzed round the room to the louder strains of the band.

Renée leant against the wall. She looked on, pale, with pursed lips. An old gentleman came gallantly to ask her why she did not dance. She had to smile, to answer something. She made her escape, she entered the supper-room. The room was empty. Amid the pillaged sideboards, the bottles and plates left lying about, Maxime and Louise sat quietly supping at one end of the table, side by side, on a napkin they had spread out between them. They looked quite at home, they laughed amid this disorder, amid the dirty plates, the greasy dishes, the still tepid remnants of the gluttony of the white-gloved supper-eaters. They had contented themselves with brushing away the crumbs around them. Baptiste stalked solemnly round the table, without a glance for the room, which looked as though it had been traversed by a pack of wolves; he waited for the servants to come and restore a semblance of order to the sideboards.

Maxime had succeeded in getting a very comfortable supper together. Louise adored nougat aux pistaches, a plateful of which had remained intact on the top of a sideboard. They had three partially-emptied bottles of champagne before them. " Perhaps papa has gone," said the girl.

" So much the better! " replied Maxime. " I will see you home."

And as she laughed:

" You know, they have made up their minds that I am to marry you. It's no longer a joke, it's serious . . . . What are we going to do when we get married? "

"We'll do what the others do, of course!"

This joke escaped her rather quickly; she hastily added, as though to withdraw it:

"We will go to Italy. That will be good for my chest, I am very ill . . . . Ah, my poor Maxime, what a funny wife you'll have! I'm no fatter than two sous' worth of butter."

She smiled, with a touch of melancholy, in her page's dress. A dry cough sent a hectic flush to her cheeks.

"It's the nougat," she said. "I'm not allowed to eat it at home . . . . Pass me the plate, I will put the rest in my pocket."

And she was emptying out the plate, when Renée entered. She went straight to Maxime, making an unconscionable effort to keep herself from cursing, from striking that hunchback whom she found there sitting at table with her lover.

"I want to speak to you," she stammered, in a husky voice.

He wavered, alarmed, fearing to be alone with her.

"Alone, and at once," repeated Renée.

"Why don't you go, Maxime?" said Louise, with her unfathomable look. "You might at the same time see if you can discover what's become of my father. I lose him at every party we go to."

He rose, he endeavoured to stop Renée in the middle of the supper-room, asking her what she could have of so urgent a nature to communicate to him. But she rejoined between her teeth:

"Follow me, or I'll speak out before everybody!"

He turned very pale, he followed her with the docility of a beaten animal. She thought Baptiste looked at her; but at this moment what did she care for the valet's steady gaze? At the door the cotillon detained her a third time.

"Wait," she muttered. "These idiots will never finish."

And she took his hand, lest he should try to get away.

M. de Saffré was placing the Duc de Rozan with his back to the wall, in a corner of the room beside the door of the dining-room. He put a lady in front of him, then a gentleman back to back with the lady, then another lady facing the gentleman,

and so on in a line, couple by couple, like a long snake. As the ladies lingered and talked:

"Come along, mesdames!" he cried. "Take your places for the 'Columns.'"

They came, "the columns" were formed. The indecency of finding themselves thus caught, squeezed in between two men, leaning against the back of one, and feeling the chest of the other in front, made these ladies very gay. The tips of the breasts touched the facings of the dress-coats, the legs of the gentlemen disappeared in the ladies' skirts, and when any sudden outburst of merriment made a head lean forward, the moustachios in front were obliged to draw back so as not to carry matters so far as kissing. At one moment a wag must have given a slight push, for the line closed up, the men plunged deeper into the skirts; there were little cries, laughs, endless laughs. The Baronne de Meinhold was heard to say: "But, monsieur, you are smothering me; don't squeeze me so hard!" and this seemed so amusing, and occasioned so mad a fit of hilarity in the whole row that "the columns" tottered, staggered, clashed together, leant one against the other to avoid falling. M. de Saffré waited with raised hands, ready to clap. Then he clapped. At this signal, suddenly, all turned round. The couples who found themselves face to face clasped waists, and the row dispersed its chaplet of dancers into the room. None remained but the poor Duc de Rozan, who, on turning round, found himself stuck with his nose against the wall. He was ridiculed.

"Come," said Renée to Maxime.

The band still played the waltz. This soft music, whose monotonous rhythm tended to become insipid, redoubled Renée's exasperation. She gained the small drawing-room, holding Maxime by the hand; and pushing him up the staircase that led to the dressing-room:

"Go up," she ordered.

She followed him. At this moment Madame Sidonie, who had been prowling after her sister-in-law the whole evening, aston-

ished at her continual wanderings through the rooms, just reached the conservatory steps. She saw a man's legs plunging into the darkness of the little staircase. A pale smile lit up her waxen face, and catching up her sorceress's dress so as to go quicker, she hunted for her brother, upsetting a figure of the cotillon, questioning the servants she met on her way. She at last found Saccard with M. de Mareuil in a room adjacent to the dining-room, that had been fitted up as a temporary smoking-room. The two fathers were discussing the settlements, the contract. But when his sister came up and whispered a word in his ear, Saccard rose, apologized, disappeared.

Upstairs, the dressing-room was in complete disorder. On the chairs trailed Echo's costume, the torn tights, odds and ends of crumpled lace, under-clothing thrown aside in a heap, all that a woman in the hurry of being waited for leaves behind her. The little ivory and silver utensils lay here, there, and everywhere; there were brushes and nail-files that had fallen on to the carpet; and the towels, still damp, the cakes of soap forgotten on the marble slab, the scent bottles left unstoppered lent a strong, pungent odour to the flesh-coloured tent. Renée, to remove the white from her arms and shoulders, had dipped herself in the pink marble bath, after the tableaux-vivants. Iridescent soap-stains floated on the surface of the water now grown cold.

Maxime stepped on a corset, almost stumbled, tried to laugh. But he shuddered before Renée's stern face. She came up to him, pushed him, said in a low voice:

"So you are going to marry the hunchback?"

"Not a bit of it," he murmured. "Who told you so?"

"Oh, don't tell any lies, it's no use. . . ."

He had a moment of resistance. She alarmed him, he wanted to have done with her.

"Well then, yes, I am going to marry her. And what then? . . . Am I not my own master?"

She came up to him, with her head a little lowered, and with a wicked laugh, and seizing his wrists:

"The master! you the master! . . . You know better than that. It is I who am your master. I could break your arms if I were spiteful; you are no stronger than a girl."

And as he struggled, she twisted his arms with all the nervous violence of her anger. He uttered a faint cry. Then she let go, resuming:

"See? we'd better not fight; I should only beat you."

He remained pallid, with the shame of the pain he felt at his wrists. He watched her coming and going in the dressing-room. She pushed back the furniture, reflecting, fixing on the plan that had been revolving in her head since her husband had told her of the marriage.

"I shall lock you up here," she said at last; "and as soon as it's daylight we'll start for Havre."

He grew still paler with alarm and stupor.

"But this is madness!" he cried. "We can't run away together. You are going off your head."

"Very likely. In any case it is you and your father who have driven me so . . . . I want you, and I mean to have you. So much the worse for the fools!"

A red light gleamed from her eyes. She continued, approaching Maxime once more, scorching his face with her breath:

"What do you think would become of me if you married the hunchback? You would laugh at me between you, I should perhaps be obliged to take back that great noodle of a Mussy, who would leave my very feet indifferent . . . . When people have done what you and I have done, they stick to one another. Besides, it's quite plain. I am bored when you're not there, and as I'm going away, I shall take you with me . . . . You can tell Céleste what you want her to fetch from your place."

The unfortunate Maxime held out his hands, beseeching her:

"Look here, Renée dear, don't be silly. Be yourself . . . . Just think of the scandal."

"What do I care for the scandal! If you refuse, I shall go down to the drawing-room and cry out that I have slept with you,

and that you're base enough now to want to marry the hunchback."

He bent his head, listened to her, already yielding, accepting this will that thrust itself so rudely upon him.

"We will go to Havre," she resumed in a lower voice, caressing her dream, "and from there we shall cross to England. Nobody shall ever interfere with us again. If that is not far enough away, we shall go to America. I who am always so cold shall be better there. I have often envied the creoles . . . ."

But in the measure that she enlarged upon her proposal, Maxime's terror was renewed. To leave Paris, to go so far away with a woman who was undoubtedly mad, to leave behind him a tale whose scandalous side would exile him for ever! it was as though he were being stifled by a hideous nightmare. He sought desperately for a means of escape from this dressing-room, from this rose-coloured retreat where tolled the passing-bell of Charenton. He thought he had hit upon something.

"You see, I have no money," he said, gently, so as not to exasperate her. "If you lock me in, I can't procure any."

"But I have," she replied, triumphantly. "I have a hundred thousand francs. It all fits in capitally . . . ."

She took from the looking-glass wardrobe the deed of transfer which her husband had left with her, in the vague hope that she might lose her senses. She laid it on the toilet-table, ordered Maxime to give her a pen and ink from the bedroom, and pushing back the soap-dishes, said, as she signed the deed:

"There, the folly's done. If I am robbed, it is because I choose to be . . . . we will call at Larsonneau's on the way to the station . . . . Now, my little Maxime, I am going to lock you in, and we will escape through the garden when I've turned all these people out of the house. We don't even need to take any luggage."

She resumed her gaiety. This mad freak delighted her. It was a piece of supreme eccentricity, a finish which, in her crisis of raging fever, seemed to her entirely original. It far surpassed her

desire for the balloon voyage. She came and took Maxime in her arms, murmuring:

"My poor darling, did I hurt you just now? You see, you refused . . . . But you shall see how nice it will be. Would your hunchback ever love you as I love you? She's not a woman, that little darkie . . . ."

She laughed, she drew him to her, kissed him on the lips, when a sound made them both turn round. Saccard stood on the threshold.

A terrible silence ensued. Slowly, Renée took her arms from around Maxime's neck; and she did not lower her brow, she continued staring at her husband with wide eyes, fixed like those of one dead; while the young man, dumbfoundered and terrified, staggered with bowed head, now that he was no longer sustained by her embrace. Stunned by this culminating blow which at last made the husband and the father cry out within him, Saccard stood where he was, livid, burning them from afar with the fire of his glances. In the moist, fragrant atmosphere of the room, the three candles flared very high, their flames erect, with the immobility of fiery tears. And alone to break the silence, the terrible silence, a breath of music floated up through the narrow staircase: the waltz, with its serpentine modulations, glided, coiled, died away on the snow-white carpet, among the split tights and the skirts fallen on the floor.

Then the husband stepped forward. A desire for brutality mottled his complexion, he clenched his fists to strike down the guilty pair. Anger in this small, turbulent man burst forth with the report of fire-arms. He gave a strangled chuckle, and always approaching:

"You were announcing your marriage to her, I suppose?"

Maxime retreated, leaned up against the wall.

"Listen," he stammered, "it was she. . . ."

He was about to accuse her like a coward, to cast the crime upon her shoulders, to say that she wanted to carry him off, to defend himself with the meekness and the trepidation of a child detected

in fault. But his strength failed him, the words expired in his throat. Renée kept her statuesque rigidity, her mute air of defiance. Then Saccard, no doubt to find a weapon, threw a rapid glance around him. And on the corner of the toilet-table, among the combs and nail-brushes, he caught sight of the deed of transfer, whose stamped paper lay yellow on the marble. He looked at the deed, looked at the guilty pair. Then, leaning forward, he saw that the deed was signed. His eyes went from the open inkstand to the pen still wet, lying at the foot of the candle-stick. He remained standing before this signature, reflecting.

The silence seemed to increase, the flames of the candles grew longer, the waltz passed along the hangings with a softer lullaby. Saccard gave an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders. He looked again at his wife and son with a penetrating air, as though to wring from their faces an explanation that he was unable to supply. Then he slowly folded up the deed, placed it in the pocket of his dress-coat. His cheeks had become quite pale.

"You did well to sign it, my dear," he said, quietly, to his wife. . . . "It's a hundred thousand francs in your pocket. I will give you the money this evening."

He almost smiled, and his hands alone still trembled. He took one or two steps, and added:

"It is stifling here. What an idea to come and hatch one of your jokes in this vapour-bath . . . !"

And addressing Maxime, who had raised his head, surprised at his father's mollified voice:

"Here, come downstairs, you!" he resumed. "I saw you come up, I came to fetch you to say good-night to M. de Mareuil and his daughter."

The two men went downstairs, talking together. Renée remained behind alone, standing in the middle of the dressing-room, staring at the gaping well of the little staircase, down which she had just seen the shoulders of the father and the son disappear. She could not take away her eyes from this well. What! they had gone off quietly, amicably! These two men had not smashed

one another! She lent an ear, she listened whether some hideous struggle were not causing the bodies to roll down the stairs. Nothing. In the tepid darkness, nothing but a sound of dancing, a long lullaby. She thought she could hear in the distance the marquise's laugh, M. de Saffré's clear voice. Then the drama was ended. Her crime, the kisses on the great gray-and-pink bed, the wild nights in the hot-house, all the accursed love that had consumed her for months came to this mean, vulgar ending. Her husband knew all, and did not even strike her. And the silence surrounding her, the silence through which trailed the never-ending waltz, frightened her more than the sound of a murder. She felt afraid of this peacefulness, afraid of this delicate, discreet dressing-room, filled with the fragrance of love.

She saw herself in the tall glass of the wardrobe. She came nearer, surprised at her own sight, forgetting her husband, forgetting Maxime, quite taken up with the strange woman she beheld before her. Madness rose to her brain. Her yellow hair, caught up at the temples and on the neck, seemed to her a nudity, an obscenity. The wrinkle in her forehead deepened to such a degree that it placed a dark bar above her eyes, the thin blue scar of a lash from a whip. Who had marked her like that? Her husband had not raised his hand, surely. And her lips astonished her by their pallor, her short-sighted eyes seemed extinct. How old she looked! She inclined her forehead, and when she saw herself in her tights, in her light gauze blouse, she gazed at herself with lowered eyelashes and sudden blushes. Who had stripped her naked? What was she doing there, bare-breasted, like a prostitute who uncovers herself to her stomach? She no longer knew. She looked at her thighs, rounded out by the tights; at her hips, whose supple lines she followed under the gauze; at her bust broadly discovered; and she was ashamed of herself, and contempt of her flesh filled her with mute anger against those who had left her thus, with mere bangles of gold at her wrists and ankles to cover her skin.

Then endeavouring, with the fixed idea of a brain giving way,

to remember what she was there for, quite naked, before that glass, she went back by a sudden bound to her childhood, and she again saw herself at the age of seven in the solemn gloom of the Hôtel Béraud. She recalled a day when Aunt Elisabeth had dressed them, Christine and her, in frocks of grey homespun with little red checks. It was at Christmas-time. How pleased they had been with these two dresses just alike! Their auntie spoiled them, and she went so far as to give them each a coral bracelet and necklace. The sleeves were long, the bodices came up to their chins, and the trinkets showed up on the stuff, and they thought it very pretty. Renée remembered too that her father was there, that he smiled in his sad way. That day she and her sister had walked up and down the children's room like grown-up people, without playing, so as not to dirty themselves. Then, at the Ladies of the Visitation, her schoolfellows had laughed at her about "her clown's dress," which came down to her finger-tips and up over her ears. She had begun to cry during lesson-time. At play-time, so that they should not make fun of her any longer, she had turned up the sleeves and tucked in the neckband of the bodice. And the necklace and bracelet seemed to her to look prettier on the skin of her neck and arm. Was that when she had first begun to strip herself naked?

Her life unrolled before her. She witnessed her long bewilderment, that racket of gold and flesh that had mounted within her, that had first come up to her knees, then to her belly, then to her lips; and now she felt its flood passing over her head, beating on her skull with quick blows. It was like a poisonous sap: it had wearied her limbs, grafted growths of shameful affection on her heart, made sickly and bestial caprices sprout in her brain. This sap had soaked into her feet on the rug of her calash, on other carpets too, on all the silk, on all the velvet upon which she had been walking since her marriage. The footsteps of others must have left behind those poisonous seeds which were now germinating in her blood and being carried along in her veins. She clearly remembered her childhood.

When she was little, she had been merely inquisitive. Even later, after that rape which had hurled her into wickedness, she had not wished for all that shame. She would certainly have become better if she had stayed knitting by Aunt Elisabeth's side. And she heard the even clicking of her aunt's needles, while she stood looking fixedly in the glass to read the peaceful future that had eluded her. But she saw only her pink thighs, her pink hips, that strange, pink silk woman standing before her, whose skin of fine closely-woven silk seemed made for the loves of dolls and puppets. She had come to that, to be a big doll from whose broken chest there issues a mere squeak of sound. Then, at the thought of the enormities of her life, the blood of her father, that middle-class blood that had always tormented her at critical moments, cried out within her, rebelled. She who had always trembled at the thought of hell, she ought to have spent her life buried in the gloomy austereness of the Hôtel Béraud. Who was it, then, that had stripped her naked?

And in the dim blue reflection of the glass she imagined she saw the figures of Saccard and Maxime rise up. Saccard, swarthy, grinning, iron-hued, with his cruel laugh, his skinny legs. The strength of that man's will! For ten years she had seen him at the forge, amid the sparks of red-hot metal, with scorched flesh, breathless, always striking, lifting hammers twenty times too heavy for his arms, at the risk of crushing himself. She understood him now; he seemed to her to have increased in height by this superhuman effort, by this stupendous rascality, this fixed idea of an immense, immediate fortune. She remembered how he sprang over obstacles, rolling over in the mud, not taking the time to wipe himself, so that he might attain his aim in good time, not even stopping for enjoyment by the wayside, munching his gold pieces while he ran. Then Maxime's fair-haired comely head appeared behind his father's rough shoulder: he had his clear harlot smile, his vacant strumpet eyes, which were never lowered, his centre parting, which showed the white of his skull. He laughed at Saccard, he looked down upon him

for taking so much trouble to make the money which he, Maxime, spent with such enchanting indolence. He was kept. His long, soft hands bore witness to his vices. His smooth body had the languid attitude of a satiated woman. In all his soft, feeble person, in which vice coursed gently like tepid water, there shone not even a gleam of the curiosity of sin. He was a passive agent. And Renée, as she looked at the two apparitions emerging from the light shade of the mirror, stepped back, saw that Saccard had thrown her like a stake, a speculation, and that Maxime had happened to be there to pick up that louis fallen from the gambler's pocket. She had always been an asset in her husband's pocket-book; he urged her on to the toilettes of a night, the lovers of a season; he wrought her in the flames of his forge, using her as a precious metal with which to gild the iron of his hands. And so, little by little, the father had driven her to such a pitch of madness and abandonment as to desire the kisses of the son. If Maxime was the impoverished blood of Saccard, she felt that she herself was the product, the maggot-eaten fruit of those two men, the pit of infamy which they had dug between them, and into which they now both rolled.

She knew now. These were they who had stripped her naked. Saccard had unhooked her bodice, and Maxime had let down her skirt. Then between them they had at last torn off her shift. At present she stood there without a rag, with bracelets of gold, like a slave. They had looked upon her not a moment ago, and they had not said to her: "You are naked." The son had trembled like a coward, shuddered at the thought of carrying his crime to the end, refused to follow her in her passion. The father instead of killing her, had robbed her; this man chastised people by rifling their pockets: a signature had fallen like a ray of sunshine into the midst of the brutality of his anger, and by way of vengeance he had carried off the signature. Then she had seen their shoulders diving down into the darkness. No blood on the carpet, not a cry, not a moan. They were cowards. They had stripped her naked.

And she recalled how, on a solitary occasion, she had read the future, on that day when, in sight of the murmuring shadows of the Parc Monceau, the thought that her husband would soil her and one day drive her mad had come to her and alarmed her growing desires. Ah! how her poor head hurt her! How she realized now the folly of the illusion which had led her to believe that she lived in a blissful world of divine enjoyment and impunity! She had lived in the land of shame, and she was punished by the desolation of her whole body, by the annihilation of her personality, now in its last agonies. She wept that she had not listened to the loud voices of the trees.

Her nudity irritated her. She turned her head, she looked around her. The dressing-room retained its heavy odour of musk, its warm silence, into which the waltz movements never ceased to penetrate, like the last expiring ripples on a sheet of water. This faint laughter of distant voluptuousness passed over her with intolerable irony. She stopped her ears so as not to hear it. Then she beheld the luxury of the room. She lifted her eyes along the pink tent, up to the silver crown that showed a podgy Cupid preparing his dart; they rested on the furniture, on the marble slab of the dressing-table, heaped up with pots and implements that now meant nothing to her; she went up to the bath still full of stagnant water; with her foot she thrust back the things that trailed down from the white satin of the easy-chairs, Echo's dress, petticoats, neglected towels. And from all these things voices of shame arose: Echo's dress reminded her of the mummery she had acquiesced in for the eccentricity of offering herself to Maxime in public; the bath exhaled the scent of her body, the water in which she had soaked herself filled the room with a sick woman's feverishness; the table with its soap-dishes and cosmetics, the furniture with its bed-life fullness spoke to her rudely of her flesh, of her amours, of all the filth that she longed to forget. She returned to the middle of the room, with crimson face, not knowing where to fly from this alcove perfume, this luxury which bared itself with a harlot's shamelessness, this

pink display. The room was naked as herself; the pink bath, the pink skin of the hangings, the pink marble of the two tables assumed an aspect of life, coiled themselves up, surrounded her with such an orgy of living lusts that she closed her eyes, lowering her forehead, crushed beneath the lace of the walls and ceiling which overwhelmed her.

But in the darkness she again saw the flesh-coloured stain of the dressing-room, and she perceived besides the gray tenderness of the bedroom, the soft gold of the small drawing-room, the hard green of the hot-house, all this accomplice luxury. It was there that her feet had been impregnated with the poisonous sap. She would never have slept with Maxime on a pallet, in a corner of a garret. It would have been too low. Silk had cast a coquettish lustre over her crime. And she dreamt of tearing down this lace, of spitting upon the silk, of kicking her great bed to pieces, of dragging her luxury into some gutter whence it would emerge worn-out and sullied as herself.

When she re-opened her eyes, she approached the mirror, looked at herself again, examined herself closely. It was all over with her. She saw herself dead. Every feature told her that the breaking-down of her brain was nearly accomplished. Maxime, that last perversion of her senses, had finished his work, had exhausted her flesh, unhinged her intellect. No joys remained for her to taste, no hope of reawakening.

At this thought a savage rage was once more kindled within her. And in a final access of desire, she dreamt of recapturing her prey, of swooning in Maxime's arms and carrying him away with her. Louise could never marry him; Louise well knew that he did not belong to her, since she had seen them kissing each other on the lips. Then she threw a fur cloak over her shoulders, so as not to pass quite naked through the hall. She went downstairs.

In the small drawing-room she came face to face with Mme. Sidonie. The latter, in order to enjoy the drama, had again

stationed herself on the conservatory steps. But she no longer knew what to think when Saccard reappeared with Maxime, and abruptly replied to her whispered questions that there was "nothing whatever." Then she guessed the truth. Her yellow face turned pale, she thought this was really too much. And she went softly and glued her ear to the door of the staircase, hoping to hear Renée cry, upstairs. When the latter opened the door, it almost struck her sister-in-law in the face.

"You are spying on me!" said Renée, angrily.

But Mme. Sidonie replied with fine disdain:

"Do you think I care about your filth!"

And catching up her sorceress's dress, retreating with a majestic look:

"It's not my fault, my dear, if you meet with mishaps. . . . But I bear no malice, do you hear? And understand that you would have found and could still find a second mother in me. I shall be glad to see you at my place, whenever you please."

Renée did not listen to her. She entered the large drawing-room, she passed through a very complicated figure of the cotillon, without even remarking the surprise which her fur cloak occasioned. In the middle of the room were groups of ladies and their partners mingling together, waving streamers, and M. de Saffré's fluted voice called out:

"Come, mesdames, the 'Mexican War.' . . . The ladies who play the bushes must spread out their skirts and remain on the ground. . . . Now the gentlemen must dance round their bushes. . . . Then when I clap my hands each of them must waltz with his bush."

He clapped his hands. The brass sang out, the waltz once more sent the couples spinning round the room. The figure was not very successful. Two ladies had been left behind on the carpet, entangled in their dresses. Madame Daste declared that the only thing that amused her in the "Mexican War" was making a "cheese" with her dress, as at school.

Renée, on reaching the hall, found Louise and her father, whom Saccard and Maxime were seeing off. The Baron Gouraud had left. Madame Sidonie went away with the Mignon and Charrier couple, while M. Hupel de la Noue escorted Madame Michelin, followed discreetly by her husband. The préfet had spent the latter part of the evening in making love to the pretty brunette. He had just succeeded in persuading her to spend a month of the fine season in his departmental town, "where she would see some really curious antiquities."

Louise, who was covertly munching the nougat which she had put in her pocket, was seized with a fit of coughing just as she was leaving the house.

"Cover yourself up," said her father.

And Maxime hastened to tighten the strings of the hood of her opera-cloak. She raised her chin, she allowed herself to be muffled up. But when Madame Saccard appeared, M. de Mareuil turned back, said good-bye. They all stayed talking there for a moment. Renée, to explain her paleness, her trembling, said that she had felt cold, that she had gone up to her room to throw this fur over her shoulders. And she watched for the moment when she could whisper to Louise, who was looking at her with tranquil curiosity. When the gentlemen shook hands once more, she leant forward, murmured:

"Tell me you're not going to marry him? It's not possible. You know quite well . . ."

But the child interrupted her, rising on tiptoe, speaking in her ear:

"Oh! make yourself easy. I shall take him away. . . . It makes no difference, since we are going to Italy."

And she smiled with her vague, vicious, sphinx-like smile. Renée was left stuttering. She did not understand, she fancied that the hunchback was laughing at her. Then when the Mareuils had gone, after several times repeating, "Till Sunday!" she looked at her husband, she looked at Maxime with her terrified eyes. And seeing their tranquil and self-satisfied

attitudes, she hid her face in her hands, fled, sought refuge in the depths of the conservatory.

The pathways were deserted. The great clumps of foliage were asleep, and on the heavy surface of the tank two budding water-lilies slowly unfolded. Renée would gladly have sought relief in tears; but this moist heat, this pungent odour which she recognized caught her at the throat, strangled her despair. She looked down at the spot in the yellow sand at her feet, on the margin of the tank, where last winter she used to spread out the bearskin rug. And when she raised her eyes, she saw yet one more figure of the cotillon right away in the background, through the two open doors.

The noise was deafening, there was a confused medley in which at first she distinguished nothing but flying skirts and black legs prancing and turning. M. de Saffré's voice cried, " Change your ladies! change your ladies! " And the couples passed by amid a fine yellow dust; each gentleman, after three or four turns in the waltz, threw his partner into the arms of his neighbour, who in his turn threw him his. The Baronne de Meinhold, in her costume as the Emerald, fell from the hands of the Comte de Chibray into the hands of Mr. Simpson; he caught her as best he could by the shoulder, while the tips of his gloves glided under her bodice. The Comtesse Vanska, flushed, jingling her coral pendants, went with a bound from the chest of M. de Saffré to the chest of the Duc de Rozan, whom she entwined in her arms and compelled to hop round for five turns, when she hung herself on the hips of Mr. Simpson, who had just flung the Emerald to the leader of the cotillon. And Madame Teissière, Madame Daste, Madame de Lauwerens shone like large, live jewels, with the blonde pallor of the Topaz, the gentle blue of the Turquoise, the ardent blue of the Sapphire, had moments of abandonment, curved under a waltzer's outstretched wrist, then started off again, fell back or forwards into a fresh embrace, visited one after the other the arms of every man in the room. However, Madame d'Espanet, standing in front of

the band, had succeeded in catching hold of Madame Haffner as she sped by, and now waltzed with her, refusing to let her go. Gold and Silver danced amorously together.

Renée then understood this whirl of skirts, this prancing of legs. Standing lower down, she could see the eagerness of the feet, the whirling of glazed shoes and white ankles. At intervals it seemed to her as though a gust of wind were about to carry off the dresses. Those bare shoulders, those bare arms, those bare heads that flew and reeled past, caught up, thrown off and caught up again at the end of that gallery, where the waltz of the band grew madder, where the red hangings swooned amid the final fever of the ball, seemed to her as the tumultuous symbol of her own life, of her self-exposures, of her surrenders. And at the thought that Maxime, to take the hunchback in his arms, had abandoned her there, in the very spot where they had loved one another, she underwent a pang so great that she thought of plucking a stalk of the tanghin-plant that grazed her cheek, and of chewing it dry. But she was afraid, and she remained before the shrub, shivering under the fur which her hands drew over her with a tight clutch, with a great gesture of terrified shame.

CHAPTER VII

THREE months later, on one of those dismal spring mornings which in Paris recall the dimness and murky humidity of winter, Aristide Saccard got out of a cab in the Place du Château-d'Eau and turned with four other gentlemen into the space in the middle of the demolitions upon the site of what was to become the Boulevard du Prince-Eugène. They formed a committee of inspection which had been sent by the compensations commission to value certain houses on the spot, their owners not having been able to come to terms with the Ville.

Saccard was repeating the stroke of fortune of the Rue de la Pépinière. So that his wife's name might remain quite out of it, he began by a spurious sale of the building-plots and the music-hall. Larsonneau handed over the lot to an imaginary creditor. The deed of sale bore the colossal figure of three million francs. This figure was so outrageous that the committee at the Hôtel de Ville, when the expropriation-agent, in the name of the non-existing landlord, claimed the amount of the purchase-money as an indemnity, refused for one moment to allow more than two millions and a half, despite the mute efforts of M. Michelin and the speeches of M. Toutin-Laroche and the Baron Gouraud. Saccard had foreseen this repulse; he refused the offer, let the case go before the jury, of which he happened to be a member, together with M. de Mareuil, by an accident to which he had no doubt contributed. And it was thus that, with four of his colleagues, he found himself appointed to make an enquiry upon his own site.

M. de Mareuil accompanied him. The three other committeemen consisted of a doctor, who smoked a cigar without caring the least in the world for the heaps of lime-rubbish he stepped over, and two business men, of whom one, a manufacturer of

surgical instruments, had formerly turned a grindstone in the streets.

The path which these gentlemen followed was abominable. It had been raining all night. The ground, soaked through and through, was turning into a river of mud, running between the demolished houses over a path cutting across the soft ground in which the dobbin-carts sank up to their axles. On either side, great pieces of wall, crenulated by the pickaxe, remained erect; tall, gutted buildings, displaying their pallid entrails, opened to mid-air their wells stripped of stairs, their gaping rooms suspended on high and resembling the broken drawers of a big, ugly piece of furniture. Nothing could be more woe-begone than the wall-papers of these rooms, blue or yellow squares falling in tatters, marking the positions, five or six stories high, close under the roofing, of wretched little garrets, cramped cabins to which perhaps a whole human existence had been limited. On the bare walls, ribbons of flues ascended side by side, lugubriously black and with abrupt bends. A forgotten weather-cock grated at the extremity of a roof, while gutters, half detached, depended like rags. And the gap yawned still wider in the midst of these ruins, like a breach opened by cannon; the roadway, as yet hardly set out, filled with rubbish, with mounds of earth and deep pools of water, stretched along under the leaden sky, amid the sinister pallor of the falling plaster-dust, edged with the black strips of chimneys as with a mourning border.

The gentlemen, with their well-blackened boots, their frock-coats and tall hats, struck a strange note in this muddy, dirty yellow landscape, across which there passed nothing but sallow workmen, horses splashed to their backs, carts whose sides were hidden beneath a coating of dust. They went in Indian file, hopping from stone to stone, avoiding the pools of liquid mire, sometimes sinking in up to their ankles and then cursing as they shook their feet. Saccard had suggested taking the Rue de Charonne, by which they would have avoided this tramp over broken ground; but unfortunately they had several plots of land

to visit on the long line of the boulevard; curiosity impelled them, they had decided to go right through the works. And moreover it interested them greatly. Sometimes they stopped, balancing themselves on a piece of plaster that had fallen into a rut, lifted their noses, called out to point out to one another a yawning flooring, a flue pointing into the air, a joist that had fallen on to a neighbouring roof. This bit of razed city at the end of the Rue du Temple seemed to them quite droll.

"It's really curious," said M. de Mareuil. "See, Saccard, look at that kitchen, up there; an old frying-pan has remained hanging there over the stove. . . . I can see it quite plainly."

But the doctor, his cigar between his teeth, had planted himself before a demolished house of which there remained only the ground-floor rooms, filled with the débris of the other stories. A solitary large piece of walling rose from the heap of brick-rubbish; and in order to overthrow it with one effort they had tied round it a rope at which some thirty workmen were tugging.

"They won't do it," muttered the doctor. "They're pulling too much to the left."

The four others retraced their steps to see the wall come down. And all five of them, with staring eyes, with bated breath waited for the fall with a thrill of rapture. The workmen, relaxing, and then suddenly stiffening themselves, cried, "Oh! heave oh!"

"They won't do it," repeated the doctor.

Then, after a few seconds of anxiety:

"It's moving, it's moving," joyously said one of the business-men.

And when the wall at last gave way and came down with a thundering crash, raising a cloud of plaster, the gentlemen looked at one another with smiles. They were enchanted. Their frock-coats were covered with a fine dust, which whitened their arms and shoulders.

They now talked of the workmen, while resuming their cautious progress across the puddles. There were not many

good ones amongst them. They were all sluggards, spendthrifts, and obstinate into the bargain, having but one dream, the ruin of their employers. M. de Mareuil, who for the last minute had with a shudder been watching two poor devils perched on the corner of a roof hacking at a wall with their pickaxes, expressed the opinion that those fellows were very plucky all the same. The others stopped once more, raised their eyes to the labourers balancing themselves, leaning over, striking with all their might; they shoved down the stones with their feet and quietly watched them smashing beneath them: had their pickaxe gone wide of the mark, the mere momentum of their arms would have hurled them to the bottom.

"Bah! they're used to it," said the doctor, replacing his cigar between his lips. "They're brutes."

They now reached one of the houses they had to inspect. They hurried through their task in a quarter of an hour, and resumed their walk. They gradually lost their disgust for the mud; they walked straight across the pools, giving up all hope of keeping their boots clean. When they had passed the Rue Ménilmontant, one of the business-men, the ex-knife-grinder, became restless. He examined the ruins around him, failed to recognize the neighbourhood. He said he had lived thereabouts, more than thirty years ago, on his first arrival in Paris, and that he should much like to find the place again. He kept on searching with his eyes, when the sight of a house which the labourers' picks had already cut into two made him stop short in the middle of the road. He studied the door, the windows. Then, pointing with his finger to a corner of the demolished building, right up above:

"There it is," he cried. "I recognize it!"

"What?" asked the doctor.

"My room, of course! That's it!"

It was on the fifth floor, a little room which must formerly have looked out on a courtyard. A breach in the wall showed it, quite bare, already cut into on one side, with its wall-paper

with a pattern of big yellow flowers, a broad torn strip of which trembled in the wind. On the left they could still see the recess of a cupboard, lined with blue paper. And beside it was the aperture for a stove-pipe, with a bit of piping left in it.

The ex-workman was seized with emotion.

"I spent five years there," he murmured. "I didn't have a good time in those days; but no matter, I was young. . . . You see the cupboard; that's where I put my three hundred francs, sou by sou. And the hole for the stove-pipe, I can still remember the day I made it. There was no fireplace in the room, it was bitterly cold, the more so as there were not often two of us."

"Come, come," interrupted the doctor, joking, "we don't ask you for any confidences. You sowed your wild oats like the rest of us."

"That's true enough," ingenuously resumed the worthy man. "I still remember an ironing-girl who lived over the way. . . . Do you see, the bed was on the right, near the window. . . . Ah, my poor room, what a state they've put it in!"

He was really very much upset.

"Get out," said Saccard. "There's no harm done in pulling down those old rookeries. We're going to build fine freestone houses in their stead. . . . Would you still live in a hole like that? Whereas there is nothing to prevent you from taking up your quarters on the new boulevard."

"That's true enough," replied the manufacturer, who seemed quite consoled.

The committee of enquiry halted again two houses further on. The doctor remained outside, smoking, looking at the sky. When they reached the Rue des Amandiers, the houses became more scattered; they now passed through large enclosures, pieces of waste land, where straggled some tumble-down ruins. Saccard seemed enraptured by this walk through devastations. He had just remembered the dinner he had once had with his first wife on the Buttes Montmartre, and he clearly recollected how he had pointed out to her, with the edge of his hand, the cutting

that went from the Place du Château-d'Eau to the Barrière du Trône. The realization of this far-away prophecy delighted him. He followed the cutting with the secret joys of authorship, as though he himself had struck the first blows of the pickaxe with his iron fingers. And he skipped over the puddles, reflecting that three millions were awaiting him beneath a heap of building-rubbish, at the end of this stream of greasy mire.

Meanwhile the gentlemen began to fancy themselves in the country. The road passed through gardens, whose separating walls had been pulled down. There were large clumps of budding lilac. The foliage was a very delicate, pale green. Each of these gardens, looking like a retreat hung with the verdure of the shrubs, was hollowed out with a narrow basin, a miniature cascade, bits of wall on which were painted optical delusions in the shape of fore-shortened groves, blue backgrounds of landscape. The buildings, disseminated and discreetly hidden, resembled Italian pavilions, Greek temples: moss was crumbling away the bases of the plaster columns, while lichens had already loosened the mortar of the pediments.

"Those are 'follies,'" said the doctor, with a wink.

But as he saw that the gentlemen did not understand him, he explained to them that under Louis XV the Court nobility kept up houses for their select parties. It was the fashion. And he added:

"Those places were called their 'follies.' The neighbourhood is full of them. . . . I tell you, some stiff things used to happen here."

The committee of enquiry had become very attentive. The two business-men had eyes that glittered, they smiled, looked with lively interest at these gardens, these pavilions which they had barely honoured with a glance prior to their colleague's explanations. They stood long before a grotto. But when the doctor, seeing a house already attacked by the pickaxe, said that he recognized the Comte de Savigny's 'folly,' well-known by reason of that nobleman's orgies, the whole of the committee

deserted the boulevard to go and inspect the ruins. They climbed on to the rubbish-heaps, entered the ground-floor rooms by the windows, and as the workmen were at dinner, they were able to linger there quite at their ease. They stayed a good half-hour, examining the rose-work of the ceilings, the frescoes over the door, the tortuous mouldings of the plaster yellowed with age. The doctor reconstructed the house.

"Look here," he said, "this room must be the banqueting-hall. There, in that recess of the wall, must certainly have stood a huge divan. And see, I am positive there was a mirror over the divan; there are the feet of the mirror. . . . Oh! those scamps knew jolly well how to enjoy life!"

They would never have left those old stones, which tickled their curiosity, had not Aristide Saccard, seized with impatience, said to them, laughing:

"You may look as long as you like, the ladies are gone. . . . Let's get on with our business."

But before leaving, the doctor climbed on to a mantel-shelf in order delicately to detach, with a blow from a pickaxe, a little painted Cupid's head, which he put into the pocket of his frock-coat.

They arrived at last at the end of their journey. The land that was formerly Mme. Aubertot's was very extensive; the music-hall and the garden took up barely the half of it, the rest had here and there a few houses of no importance. The new boulevard cut diagonally across this huge parallelogram, which circumstance had allayed one of Saccard's fears: he had long imagined that only a corner of the music-hall would be cut off. And accordingly Larsonneau had been instructed to talk very big, as the bordering plots ought to increase at least five-fold in value. He was already threatening against the municipality to avail himself of a recent decree that authorized the land-owners to deliver up no more than the ground absolutely necessary for the public works.

The expropriation-agent received the gentlemen in person.

He walked them through the garden, made them go over the music-hall, showed them a huge bundle of documents. But the two business men had gone down again, accompanied by the doctor, whom they still questioned about the Comte de Savigny's folly, of which their minds were full. They listened to him with gaping mouths, all three standing beside a *jeu de tonneau.* And he talked to them of the Pompadour, told them of the amours of Louis XV, while M. de Mareuil and Saccard continued the enquiry alone.

"That's finished," said the latter, returning to the garden. "If you allow me, messieurs, I will undertake to draw up the report."

The surgical-instrument maker did not even hear. He was deep in the Regency.

"What queer times, all the same!" he muttered.

Then they found a cab in the Rue de Charonne, and they drove off, splashed up to their knees, but as satisfied with their walk as though they had had a day in the country. The conversation changed in the cab, they talked politics, they said that the Emperor was doing great things. They had never seen anything like what they had seen just now. That great, long, straight street would be splendid when the houses were built.

Saccard drew up the report, and the jury granted three millions. The speculator was at the end of his tether, he could not have waited another month. This money saved him from ruin and even from the dock. He paid five hundred thousand francs on account of the million which he owed to his upholsterer and his builder, for the house in the Parc Monceau. He stopped up other holes, flung himself into new companies, deafened Paris with the sound of the real crown-pieces which he shovelled out on to the shelves of his iron safe. The golden stream had a source at last. But it was not yet a solid, entrenched fortune, flowing with an even, continuous current. Saccard, saved from a crisis, thought himself a beggar with the crumbs of his three millions, said frankly that he was still too poor, that he could

not stop. And soon the ground cracked once more beneath his secretaries to help me."

Larsonneau had behaved so admirably in the Charonne business that Saccard, after a short hesitation, had the honesty to give him his ten per cent. and his bonus of thirty thousand francs. The expropriation-agent thereupon started a banking-house. When his accomplice peevishly accused him of being richer than himself, the yellow-gloved coxcomb replied with a laugh:

"You see, dear master, you're very clever at making the five-franc pieces rain down, but you don't know how to pick 'em feet.

Madame Sidonie profited by her brother's stroke of luck to borrow ten thousand francs of him, with which she went and spent two months in London. She returned without a sou. It was never known where the ten thousand francs had gone to.

"Good gracious!" she replied, when they questioned her, "it all costs money. I ransacked all the libraries. I had three up."

And when she was asked if she had at last any positive information about the three milliards, she smiled at first with a mysterious air, and then ended by muttering:

"You're a lot of unbelievers. . . . I have discovered nothing, but it makes no difference. You'll see, you'll see some day."

She had not, however, wasted all her time while she was in England. Her brother the minister profited by her journey to entrust her with a delicate commission. When she returned she obtained large orders from the ministry. It was a fresh incarnation. She made contracts with the government, she undertook every imaginable kind of supply. She sold it provisions and arms for the troops, furniture for the préfectures and public departments, firewood for the museums and government-offices. The money she made did not induce her to change her everlasting black gowns, and she kept her yellow, dismal face. Saccard then reflected that it was indeed she whom he had seen long ago furtively leaving their brother Eugène's house. She must have kept

up secret relations with him all through, for reasons with which not a soul was acquainted.

Amid these interests, these burning, unquenchable thirsts, Renée suffered agonies. Aunt Elisabeth was dead; her sister had married and left the Hôtel Béraud, where her father alone remained erect in the gloomy shadow of the large rooms. Renée in one season ran through her aunt's inheritance. She gambled now. She had found a house where ladies sat at the card-table till three o'clock in the morning, losing hundreds of thousands of francs a night. She made an endeavour to drink; but she could not, she experienced invincible uprisings of disgust. Since she had found herself alone again, a prey to the mundane flood that carried her with it, she abandoned herself more than ever, not knowing with what to kill time. She succeeded in tasting of everything. And nothing touched her amid the boundless ennui which overwhelmed her. She grew older, her eyes were circled with blue, her nose became thinner, her lips pouted with sudden, uncalled-for laughter. It was the breaking-up of a woman.

When Maxime had married Louise, and the young couple had left for Italy, she no longer troubled herself about her lover, she even seemed entirely to forget him. And when after six months Maxime returned alone, having buried "the hunchback" in the cemetery of a small town in Lombardy, her feeling towards him was one of hatred. She remembered *Phèdre*, she doubtless recollected that poisonous love to which she had heard Ristori lend her sobs. Then, to avoid meeting the young man at home in future, to dig for ever an abyss of shame between the father and son, she forced her husband to take cognizance of the incest, she told him that on the day when he had surprised her with Maxime, the latter, who had long been running after her, was trying to ravish her. Saccard was terribly annoyed by her persistency in her desire to open his eyes. He was compelled to quarrel with his son, to cease to see him. The young widower, rich with his wife's dowry, took a small house in the

Avenue de l'Impératrice, where he lived alone. He gave up the Council of State, he ran race-horses. Renée experienced one of her last satisfactions. She took her revenge, she flung back the infamy these two men had set in her into their faces; she said to herself that now she would never again see them laughing at her, arm in arm, familiarly.

Amid the crumbling of Renée's affections there came a time when she had none but her maid left to love. She had gradually developed a motherly fondness for Céleste. Perhaps this girl, who was all that remained near her of Maxime's love, recalled to her hours of enjoyment for ever dead. Perhaps she simply found herself touched by the faithfulness of this servant, of this honest heart whose tranquil solicitude nothing seemed to shake. From the depth of her remorse she thanked her for having witnessed her shame without leaving her in disgust; she pictured self-denials, a whole life of renunciation, before becoming able to understand the calmness of the lady's maid in the presence of incest, her icy hands, her respectful and serene attentions. And she was all the happier in the girl's devotion as she knew her to be virtuous and thrifty, with no lovers, no vices.

Sometimes in her sad moments she would say to her:

"Ah, my good girl, it will be your duty to close my eyes."

Céleste made no reply, gave a curious smile. One morning she quietly told Renée that she was leaving, that she was going back to the country. Renée stood trembling all over, as though some great misfortune had overtaken her. She protested, she plied her with questions. Why was she deserting her when they agreed so well together? And she offered to double her wages.

But the lady's-maid, to all her kind words, replied no with a gesture, placidly and obstinately.

"Listen, madame," she ended by replying; "you might offer me all the gold in Peru, and I could not remain a week longer. Lord, you don't know me. . . . I have been eight years with you, haven't I? Well, then, ever since the first day I said to myself, 'As soon as I have got five thousand francs together,

I will go back home; I will buy Lagache's house, and I shall live very happily.' . . . It's a promise I made myself, you see. And I made up the five thousand francs yesterday, when you paid me my wages."

Renée felt a chill at her heart. She saw Céleste moving behind her and Maxime while they embraced each other, and she saw her with her indifference, her perfect unconcern, thinking of her five thousand francs. She made one more endeavour, for all that, to retain her, frightened at the void that threatened her existence, hoping, in despite of everything, to keep by her this obstinate mule whom she had looked upon as devoted and whom she discovered to be merely egotistical. The girl smiled, still shaking her head, muttering:

"No, no, I can't do it. I would refuse my own mother. . . . I shall buy two cows. I may start a little haberdasher's shop. It's very nice in our part. Oh, as to that, I don't mind if you like to come and see me. It is near Caen. I will leave you the address."

Then Renée ceased insisting. She wept scalding tears when she was alone. The next day, with the capriciousness of a sick person, she decided to accompany Céleste to the Gare de l'Ouest in her own brougham. She gave her one of her travelling-rugs, made her a present of money, fussed around her like a mother whose daughter is about to undertake a long and arduous journey. In the brougham she looked at her with humid eyes. Céleste chatted, said how pleased she was to go away. Then, emboldened, she spoke out and gave her mistress some advice.

"I should never have taken up life as you did, madame. I often said to myself, when I found you with M. Maxime: 'How is it possible to be so foolish for men!' It always ends badly. . . . Well, for my part, I always mistrusted them!"

She laughed, she threw herself back in the corner of the brougham.

"How my money would have danced!" she continued. "And

at this moment I might have been crying my eyes out. And that is why, whenever I saw a man, I took up a broomstick. . . . I never dared tell you all this. Besides, it wasn't my business. You were free to do as you pleased, and I had only to earn my money honestly."

At the railway-station Renée said she would pay her fare, and took a first-class ticket for her. As they had arrived before their time, she detained her, pressed her hands, reiterated:

"And mind you take great care of yourself, look after yourself well, my dear Céleste."

The latter let herself be petted. She stood looking happy, with a fresh, smiling face under her mistress's eyes, which were swimming in tears. Renée again spoke of the past. And suddenly the other exclaimed:

"I was forgetting: I never told you the story of Baptiste, monsieur's valet. . . . I suppose they did not care to tell you. . . ."

Renée owned that as a matter of fact she did not know.

"Well, then, you remember his grand, dignified airs, his scornful look, you yourself spoke to me about them. . . . All that was play-acting. . . . He didn't like women, he never came down to the servants' hall when we were there: and he even, I can tell you now, pretended that it was disgusting in the drawing-room, because of the low-necked dresses. I well believe it, that he didn't like women! "

And she leant toward Renée's ear; she made her blush, the while she herself retained her virtuous composure.

"When the new stable-lad," she continued, "told everything to monsieur, monsieur preferred to dismiss Baptiste rather than have him prosecuted. It seems that filthy sort of thing had been going on in the stables for years. . . . And to think that great rascal pretended to be fond of horses! It was the grooms he was after."

The bell interrupted her. She hurriedly caught up the nine or

ten packages from which she had refused to be parted. She allowed herself to be kissed. Then she went off, without looking back.

Renée remained in the station till the engine whistled. And when the train had gone, she did not know what to do in her despair; her days seemed to stretch before her as empty as this great hall where she had been left alone. She stepped back into her brougham, she told the coachman to drive her home. But on the way she changed her mind; she was afraid of her room, of the tediousness awaiting her there; she had not even the spirit to go in and change her dress for her customary drive round the lake. She felt a need of sunlight, a need of crowd.

She ordered the coachman to drive to the Bois.

It was four o'clock. The Bois was awakening from the drowsiness of the warm afternoon. Clouds of dust flew along the Avenue de l'Impératrice, and one could see in the distance the expanse of verdure contained by the slopes of Saint-Cloud and Suresnes, crowned by the gray mass of Mont-Valérien. The sun, high on the horizon, swept down, filling the hollows of the foliage with a golden dust, lighting up the tall branches, changing that sea of leaves into a sea of light. But past the fortifications, in the drive of the Bois leading to the lake, the roads had been watered, the carriages rolled over the brown earth as over the pile of a carpet, amid a freshness, a rising fragrance of moist earth. On either side the trees of the copses reared their crowd of young trunks amid the low bushes, losing themselves in the greenish twilight, which streaks of light pierced here and there with yellow clearings; and as the lake drew nearer, the chairs on the side-paths became more numerous, families sat with quiet, silent faces, watching the endless procession of wheels. Then, on reaching the open space before the lake, there was an effulgence; the slanting sun transformed the round sheet of water into a great mirror of polished silver, reflecting the blazing disk of the luminary. Eyes blinked, one could only distinguish on the left, near the bank, the dark patch of the

pleasure-boat. The sunshades in the carriages inclined with a gentle, uniform movement towards this splendour, and were not raised until they reached the avenue skirting the water which, from above the bank, now assumed a metallic darkness streaked with burnished gold. On the right, the clumps of fir-trees stretched forth their colonnades of straight, slender stems, whose soft violet tint was reddened by the flames of the sky; on the left, the lawns, bathed in light, spread out like fields of emeralds to the distant lacework of the Porte de la Muette. And on approaching the cascade, while the dimness of the copses was renewed on one side, the islands at the further end of the lake rose up against the blue sky, with their sunlit banks, the bold shadows of their pine-trees, and the Châlet at their feet looked like a child's plaything lost in the corner of a virgin forest. The whole park laughed and quivered in the sun.

Renée felt ashamed of her brougham, of her dress of puce-coloured silk, on this splendid day. She ensconced herself a little, and through the open windows looked out at this flood of light covering the water and the verdure. At the bends of the drives she caught sight of the line of wheels revolving like golden stars in a long track of blinding lights. The varnished panels, the gleam of the bits of brass and steel, the bright hues of the dresses passed on in the even trot of the horses, set against the background of the Bois a long moving bar, a ray fallen from the sky, stretching out and following the bends of the roadway. And in this ray Renée, blinking her eyes, at intervals saw a woman's fair chignon, a footman's dark back, the white mane of a horse detach itself. The rounded sunshades of watered silk shimmered like moons of metal.

Then, in the presence of this broad daylight, of these sheets of sunshine, she thought of the fine dust of twilight which she had seen falling one evening upon the yellow leaves. Maxime was with her. It was at the period when her lust for that child was awakening within her. And she saw again the lawns soaked by the evening air, the darkened copses, the deserted pathways.

The line of carriages drove on with a mournful sound past the empty chairs, while to-day the rumble of the wheels, the trot of the horses, sounded with the joyousness of a fanfare of trumpets. Then all her drives in the Bois came back to her. She had lived there, Maxime had grown up there, by her side, on the cushion of her carriage. It was their garden. Rain had surprised them there, sunshine brought them back, night had not always driven them away. They drove there in every kind of weather, they tasted there the disappointments and the delights of their life. Amid the void of her existence, amid the melancholy caused by Céleste's departure, these memories imparted to her a bitter joy. Her heart said, "Never again! never again!" And she remained frozen when she evoked the image of that winter landscape, that congealed and dimmed lake upon which they had skated; the sky was soot-coloured, the snow had stitched white bands of lace upon the trees, the wind blew fine sand into their faces.

Meantime, on the left hand, on the track reserved for riders, she had recognized the Duc de Rozan, M. de Mussy, and M. de Saffré. Larsonneau had killed the duc's mother by presenting to her, as they fell due, the hundred and fifty thousand francs' worth of bills accepted by the son, and the duc was running through his second half million with Blanche Muller after leaving the first five hundred thousand francs in the hands of Laure d'Aurigny. M. de Mussy, who had left the Embassy in London for the Embassy at Florence, had become gallant once more; he led the cotillon with renewed grace. As to M. de Saffré, he remained the fastest and most amiable sceptic in the world. Renée saw him urging his horse towards the carriage-door of the Comtesse Vanska, with whom he was said to have been infatuated ever since the day when he had seen her as Coral at the Saccard's.

All the ladies were there besides: the Duchesse de Sternich in her everlasting chariot, Madame de Lauwerens in a landau, with the Baronne de Meinhold and little Madame Daste in front of

her; Madame Teissière and Madame de Guende in a victoria. Among these ladies, Sylvia and Laure d'Aurigny displayed themselves on the cushions of a magnificent calash. Even Madame Michelin passed by, ensconced in a brougham; the pretty brunette had been on a visit to M. Hupel de la Noue's departmental town, and on her return she had appeared in the Bois in this brougham, to which she hoped soon to add an open carriage. Renée also perceived the Marquise d'Espanet and Madame Haffner, the inseparables, hidden beneath their sunshades, stretched side by side, laughing amorously into each other's eyes.

Then the gentlemen drove by. M. de Chibray in a drag; Mr. Simpson in a dog-cart; the Sieurs Mignon and Charrier, keener than ever after work despite their dream of approaching retirement, in a brougham which they left at the corner of the drives in order to go a bit of the way on foot; M. de Mareuil, still in mourning for his daughter, looking out for bows in acknowledgment of his first interruption uttered the day before at the Corps Législatif, airing his political importance in the carriage of M. Toutin-Laroche, who had once more saved the Crédit Viticole after bringing it to the verge of ruin, and who was being made still thinner and still more imposing by his work on the Senate.

And to close the procession, as a last display of majesty, came the Baron Gouraud, lolling in the sun on the two pillows with which his carriage was furnished. Renée was surprised and disgusted to recognize Baptiste seated by the coachman's side, with his pale face and his solemn air. The tall lackey had taken service with the baron.

The copses sped past, the water of the lake grew iridescent under the more slanting rays, the line of carriages stretched out its dancing lights. And Renée, herself caught up and carried away amid this enjoyment, was vaguely conscious of all these appetites rolling along through the sunlight. She felt no indignation with these devourers of the hounds' fee. But she hated them by reason of their joy, of this triumph which showed them

full in the golden dusk that fell from the sky. They were gorgeous and smiling; the women displayed themselves white and plump; the men had the quick glances, the enamoured deportment of successful lovers. And she, down in her empty heart, found nought but lassitude, but repressed envy. Was she better, then, than others, that she should thus give way under the weight of pleasure? or was it the others who were to be praised for having stronger loins than hers? She did not know, she longed for new desires with which to begin life afresh, when, turning her head, she perceived beside her, on the side-path edging the coppice, a sight that rent her with a supreme blow.

Saccard and Maxime were walking along with short steps, arm-in-arm. The father must have been to see the son, and together they had come down from the Avenue de l'Impératrice to the lake, chatting as they went.

"Listen to me," said Saccard, "you're a simpleton. . . . A man like you, with money, doesn't let it lie idle at the bottom of his drawers. There is a hundred per cent. to be made in the business I am telling you of. It's a safe investment. You know very well I wouldn't let you be done."

But the young man seemed wearied by this persistence. He smiled in his pretty way, he looked at the carriages.

"Do you see that little woman over there, the woman in violet?" he said suddenly. "That's a washer-girl whom that ass of a Mussy has brought out."

They looked at the woman in violet. Then Saccard took a cigar from his pocket, and turning to Maxime, who was smoking:

"Give me a light."

Then they stopped for a moment, facing each other, bringing their faces close together. When the cigar was alight:

"Look here," continued the father, once more taking his son's arm, pressing it tightly under his own, "you're a fool if you

don't take my advice. Well! is it agreed? Will you bring me the hundred thousand francs to-morrow? "

"You know I no longer go to your house," replied Maxime, compressing his lips.

"Bah! rubbish! it's time at last there was end to all that!"

And as they took a few steps in silence, at the moment when Renée, feeling about to faint away, pressed back her head against the padding of the brougham so as not to be seen, a growing rumour ran along the line of carriages. The pedestrians on the side-paths halted, turned round, open-mouthed, following with their eyes something that approached. There was a quicker sound of wheels, carriages drew aside respectfully, and two outriders appeared, clad in green, with round caps on which danced golden tassels with their cords outspread all round; leaning slightly forward, they trotted on upon the backs of their large bay horses. Behind them they left an empty space. Then, in this empty space, the Emperor appeared.

He occupied alone the back seat of a landau. Dressed in black, with his frock-coat buttoned up to his chin, he wore, a little on one side, a very tall hat, whose silk glistened. In front of him, on the other seat, sat two gentlemen, dressed with that correct elegance which was in favour at the Tuileries, serious, their hands upon their knees, with the silent air of two wedding-guests taken for a drive amid the curiosity of the crowd.

Renée thought the Emperor aged. His mouth opened more feebly under his thick waxed moustache. His eyelids fell more heavily to the point of half covering his lifeless eyes, the yellow grayness of which was yet more bleared. And his nose alone retained its look of a dry fish-bone set in the vagueness of his face.

Meantime, while the ladies in the carriage smiled discreetly, the people on foot pointed the sovereign out to one another.

A fat man asserted that the Emperor was the gentleman with his back to the coachman on the left. A few hands were raised

to salute. But Saccard, who had taken off his hat even before the outriders had passed, waited till the imperial carriage was exactly in front of him; and then shouted in his thick Provençal voice:

"Long live the Emperor!"

The Emperor, surprised, turned round, seemed to recognize the enthusiast, returned the bow with a smile. And everything disappeared in the sunlight, the carriages closed up, Renée could only perceive, above the manes of the horses, between the backs of the lackeys, the outriders' green caps dancing with their golden tassels.

She remained for a moment with wide-open eyes, full of this vision, which reminded her of another moment in her life. It seemed to her as if the Emperor, by mingling with the line of carriages, had just set in it the last necessary ray, and given an intention to this triumphal procession. Now it was a glorification. All these wheels, all these men with decorations, all these women languidly reclining disappeared among the flash and the rumbling of the imperial landau. This sensation became so acute and so painful that Renée felt an imperious need to escape from this triumph, from that cry of Saccard's, still ringing in her ears, from that sight of the father and son walking along with short steps, chatting arm-in-arm. She sought about, her hands folded on her breast, as though burnt with an internal fire; and it was with a sudden hope of relief, of healing coolness, that she leant forward and said to the coachman:

"To the Hôtel Béraud."

The courtyard retained its cloistral coldness; Renée went round the colonnades, happy in the dampness which fell upon her shoulders. She approached the basin, green with moss, its edges polished by wear; she looked at the lion's head half worn away, with gaping jaws, discharging a stream of water through an iron pipe. How often had she and Christine taken this head in their childish arms to lean forward and reach the stream of water which they loved to feel flowing cold as ice over their little

hands. Then she climbed the great silent staircase, she saw her father at the end of the string of wide rooms; he drew up his tall figure, he slowly passed deeper into the shade of this old house, of this proud solitude in which he had absolutely cloistered himself since his sister's death; and she thought of the men in the Bois, of that other old man, the Baron Gouraud, rolling his flesh in the sun, on pillows. She climbed higher, she followed the passages, the servants' stairs, she made the journey towards the children's room. When she reached the very top, she found the key on its usual nail, a big, rusty key, on to which spiders had spun their web. The lock gave a plaintive cry. How sad was the children's room! She felt a pang at her heart on finding it so deserted, so gray, so silent. She closed the open door of the aviary, with the vague idea that it must have been by that door that the joys of her childhood had flown away. She stopped before the flower-boxes, still full of soil hardened and cracked like dry mud, she broke off with her fingers a rhododendron-stalk: this skeleton of a plant, shrivelled and white with dust, was all that remained of their living clusters of verdure. And the matting, the very matting, discoloured, rat-gnawed, displayed itself with the melancholy of a shroud that has for years been awaiting the promised corpse. In a corner, amid this mute despair, this silent weeping abandonment, she found one of her old dolls; all the bran had flowed out through a hole, and the porcelain head continued to smile with its enamelled lips, above the wasted body, which seemed as though exhausted by puppet follies.

Renée was stifled amid this tainted atmosphere of her childhood. She opened the window, she looked out upon the boundless landscape. There nothing was soiled. She found again the eternal joys, the eternal youth of the open air. The sun must be sinking behind her; she saw only the rays of the setting luminary gilding with infinite softness this bit of town which she knew so well. It was a last song of daylight, a refrain of gaiety which was subsiding slowly over all things. Below, ruddy flames lit

up the boom, while the lacework of the iron chains of the Pont de Constantine stood out against the whiteness of its supports. Then, more to the right, the dark foliage of the Halle aux Vins and of the Jardin des Plantes gave the impression of a great pool of stagnant, moss-covered water, whose green surface blended in the distance with the mist of the sky. On the left, the Quai Henri IV and the Quai de la Rapée extended the same row of houses, the houses which the little girls used to see there twenty years ago, together with the same brown patches of sheds, the same red factory-chimneys. And above the trees, the slated roof of the Salpétrière, made blue by the suns leave-taking, appeared to her suddenly like an old friend. But what calmed her, what brought coolness to her breast, was the long gray banks, was above all the Seine, the giant, which she watched coming from the edge of the horizon, straight down to her, as in those happy days when they had been afraid lest they should see it swelling and surging up to their window. She remembered their fondness for the river, their love for its colossal flux, for this quivering of murmuring water, spreading like a sheet at their feet, opening out around them, behind them, into two arms which they could not see, though they could still feel its great, pure caress. They were coquettes already, and they used to say, on fine days, that the Seine had put on its pretty dress of green silk shot with white flames; and the eddies where the water rippled trimmed the dress with frills of satin, while in the distance, beyond the belt of the bridges, splashes of light spread out lappets of sun-coloured stuff.

And Renée, raising her eyes, looked at the vast arch of pale, blue sky, fading little by little in the effacement of the twilight. She thought of the accomplice city, of the flaring nights of the boulevards, of the sultry afternoons in the Bois, of the crude, pallid days in the great, new mansions. Then, when she lowered her head, when she glanced again upon the peaceful horizon of her childhood, this corner of a middle-class and workmen's city, where she had dreamt of a life of peace, a final bitterness

mounted to her lips. With clasped hands, she sobbed in the gathering night.

Next winter, when Renée died of acute meningitis, her father paid her debts. Worms's bill came to two hundred and fifty-seven thousand francs.

THE END

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